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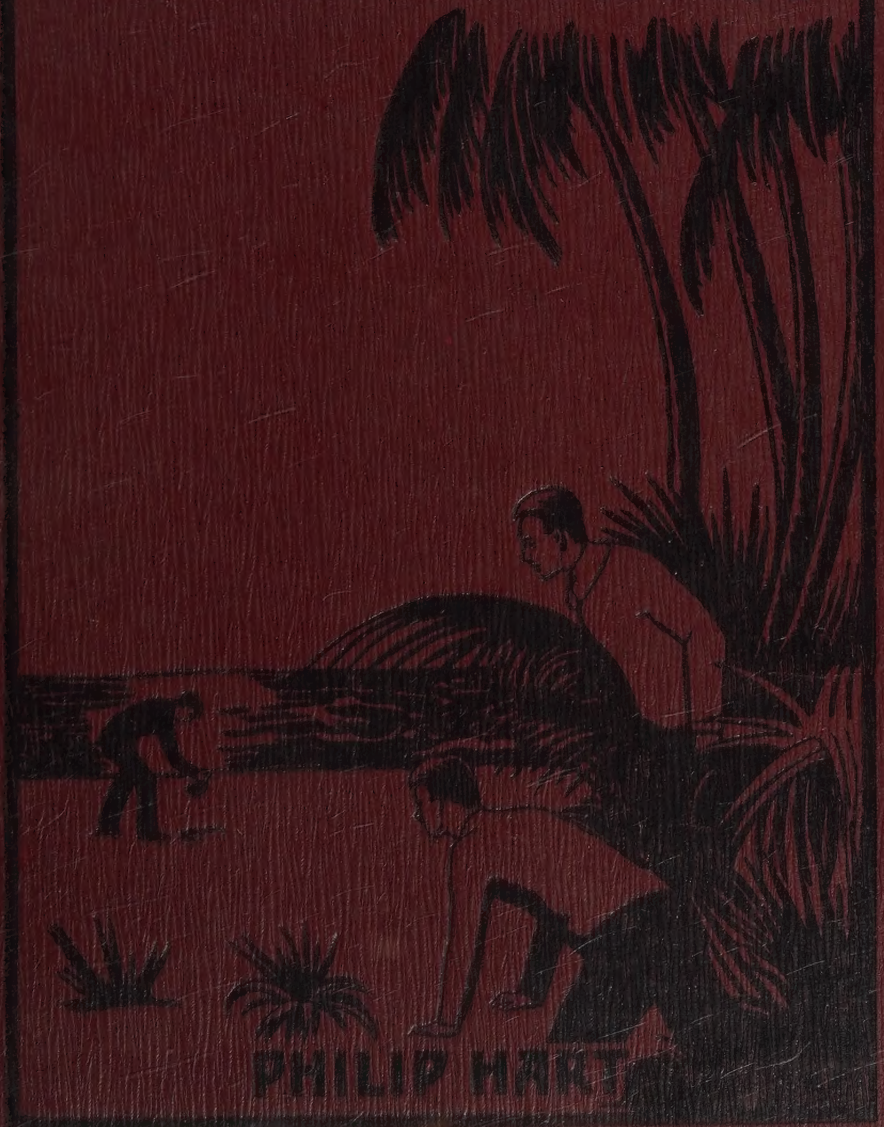

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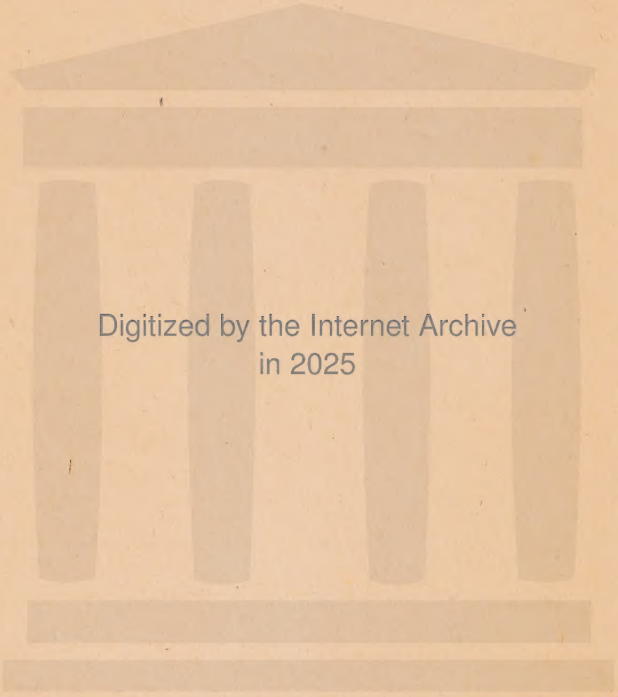
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"He's digging for something," whispered Albert.
(Page 219)

THE BLACK SKIMMER

A Story of Adventure and Mystery

By PHILIP HART

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CHAPTER I

VAN'S LAST GAME AT NORTH HIGH

HAD any one suggested, as Van eluded his foes and sped down the long, long trail toward the coveted goal, that it would be his last effort for the North High team, it is highly probable that Van's reply would have been given in some terse and expressive phrase like "You're crazy!" Nevertheless, the Fates were weaving a new pattern for Vandyke Arvin, one in which adventure had a more prominent place than if he had continued to serve his school.

In an eastern harbor, a curious and somewhat mysterious vessel was at that moment being equipped for a voyage in which Van was to have a part.

Crowds were entering the gates of the North High stadium, the recently completed glory of the big high school. The football game this afternoon was with their dearest enemy and rival, Central High. Several excited boys, one of whom was

Van's particular chum, chose seats in the center, as they leaped down the immense steps of concrete that curved like a bowl about the wide field, or arena, on which the coming battle was to be waged. At regular intervals, flights of more easily taken steps conducted the sedate elders or the girls to their places.

It was a gay scene, as the bleachers filled with the wearers of bright coats or sweaters. The October day was cool. There had even been a few flakes of snow. "Peppy," said Mark Hoyt, Van's friend.

Visiting rooters in crowds took their places. The bands came in. The North High drums beat and cymbals clashed, while horns tooted a lively tune, as a long line of North High boys, known as the Pep Squad, marched like conquering heroes in front of the applauding crowd, and wound at last in the ever famous snake dance. A few formed a circle around the little mascot of the "Tigers," who was dressed in the Tiger stripes and felt himself the most important figure in the entire number of rooters.

The band of the opposing team noisily struck up in its turn, leading the Central High rooters in a paean of praise to their team and school. This told what they had done, what they could do, and warned that they intended to do it upon the spot.

The yell leader ran along on the ground in front of them all in tense convolutions. Turning a hand

spring, he stood upright and waved frantically. "Everybody up! Now a good one, North High regular yell!" came through the big megaphone, whose new orange and black steamers flew to the breeze.

"N - N - N - N,
O - O - O - O,
R - R - T - H, High!
Ho-Hi, Zip-Zi,
Ki-Yi, North High,
North High, North High, Rah!"

The Pep Squad and the other North High rooters responded nobly to the call for this remarkable composition and the air reverberated with the yell, twice given. Similar gems representing the loyal school spirit, athletic humor and fun followed. What relief from close school rooms and the pursuit of knowledge!

Now applause and a fresh blare of trumpets welcomed the spectacular entrance of the gladiators, always thrilling, though less grim than in those days when some men expected to lose their lives for the "Roman holiday."

This year the North High team wore new outfits for their battles, bright orange and black in stripes, appropriate to their name, the Tigers. The Central High men made their appearance and both teams

scattered out over the field for their preliminary exercise or practice.

"There's Van," said Mark, beginning to point out the members of the team by their numbers to a boy who was visiting him. "Early as it is, this game may decide the championship; for both these teams are better than the other teams they play against this year. We never feel safe unless we beat Central. Van Arvin makes a good quarterback."

"Their team looks heavier to me," the visitor remarked.

"It is. If our boys are going to win, they'll have to get busy from the start. I'm afraid that this year's Central team has more endurance than ours. Look! They are going to kick off, now. That's a Central High man you see."

The rooters were quiet as they watched the first plays. The North High team well knew the advantage of early success, both in score and in morale, and were alert for opportunity. "I wish that Van were heavier," said Mark, watching his friend, "but he is muscular and a speedy runner."

In the first quarter it was straight football on both sides, favorable, toward the end of the quarter, to Central High. Their rooters were wild with enthusiasm, while North High rooters were anxious and tense. Presently the struggle was near the Central High goal, but the North High team was be-

ing successful in forcing Central back, though ever so little.

"Fight, fight, fight, fight, fight, fight, fight," and "*Hold* them! *hold* them!" shouted North High from the bleachers.

Then Central, hoping to make a touchdown on this opportunity, attempted a trick play; but somebody fumbled and the ball was lost to them, after much maneuvering and a general mix-up, not clear to Mark and his friends. Now, indeed, North High drums sounded and the beachers shouted:

"Come *on,* — Orange!
Come *on,* — Black!
Come *on,* — Tigers!
SET THEM BACK!"

With the ball in their possession, the North High team now steadily pushed in the desired direction. Mark and the other boys were keeping track of yards and downs and watching the linesmen advance. It looked as if the quarter would close without any one's having scored.

The line crouched and the ball was passed. "Who got that?" sharply inquired Mark, standing up to see, and not expecting any one to answer.

Yes, who was that now,—dodging a bit, getting clear of a plunging tackle, and carrying the ball as

he ran like the wind down the field? They had been watching the halfback, one of their best, pushing his way through the opposing line. North High rooters thought that he had the ball,—and so did the Central High team, till too late.

"Van! Van! Van! Van!" now shouted North High. "Go it, Van! Keep it up! Atta boy!"

Vandyke Arvin gave one hasty look backward to see if he had really gotten clear. Then he gave himself to the task of out-running those who were after him, his friends, who were trying to hinder his pursuers, and one fine runner of Central High, who was making a desperate effort to catch him.

But in the midst of North High cheers and wild ravings, Van hurled himself and his ball over the line, with a grim smile for the enemy who threw himself at him just too late.

"A touchdown! A touchdown in the first quarter!" cried Mark's visitor. "It looks as if you folks have a good chance. Your men will start off in good spirits for the next quarter."

"You never can tell," Mark replied, not wanting to be jubilant beyond what the facts warranted, but proud of Van. "All our best men will have to stay in all through the game. But Central isn't much better off. That's one consolation."

They were watching now to see if North High would increase its score. "Block that kick! Block

that kick!" Central High rooters were calling; and to the great disgust of North High, the kick was, indeed, blocked and the score card read six instead of seven.

The second quarter was slow. There was much measuring. First Central High was penalized for being offside; then North High was penalized for something that Mark could not see. "The boys are nervous," was his comment.

Passes were intercepted or incomplete. There was some pretty tackling on the part of North High, with some hard falls and time out. Van and several other injured or exhausted players stretched flat upon the field to rest. Mark was anxious when one North High man was helped off the field. "It's good-bye," said he, "if Jack can't play any more." But the lad was back again for the next half.

It was a hard fight, but at the end of the second quarter no one had scored and the card still read six to nothing in favor of North High.

The third quarter was more exciting to watch. Central grew a little reckless in the anxiety to score. North High fought hard to keep them from doing so, managing to handle the plays very well till the time was well advanced. But Central strength was gaining. They were now taking no chances on losing the ball and they were making their necessary gains. At every play their heavier men were

pushing their way through the North High ranks.

At last, not far from their goal, a Central High man ran free from interference to cover the short distance necessary. Central High had scored, and loud was the rejoicing from visiting rooters!

Then was North High anxious that their score should not exceed their own. "Block that kick!" they cried in their turn, but to no avail. Central successfully kicked and the bleachers watched the score card as the record changed to six against seven, in favor of Central High.

The game went on. "Watch that formation," said Mark to his friend. "Our boys are going to try a forward pass, and Central is expecting it, I think. If we lose that ball!"

But Mark was mistaken. Jack Bryant was pushing his way through as before, but this time he had the ball, escaped interference and made North High's second touchdown. Their kick was successful and the score read seven to thirteen in favor of North High.

"Tigers rah! Tigers rah!" shouted the Pep Squad, leading the jubilant chorus in the bleachers.

In the fourth quarter Central High, not as weary as North High, wanted to keep to straight football. Mark thought that his team was getting reckless. Several mistakes were made on both sides.

Presently a long punt, fumbled by Central and

picked up by a North High man, took the North High team near their goal; but in the very next play they were penalized for some breach of the rules and Mark thought that the linesman would never stop! "Poor you!" laughed Mark's friend at his expression. "Fifteen yards!" exclaimed Mark.

The penalty evidently took some of the heart out of the North High team, for the boys seemed to weaken and lost the ball on the next play. Central took advantage of the situation with an unexpected forward pass and a run to the ten yard line. This caused much excitement in the pursuit and interference.

"Hold - that - line! Hold - that - line!" cried North High rooters.

"We want a touchdown! We want a touchdown!" fervently shouted Central High supporters.

North High players stiffened for three downs, but on the fourth Central threw a successful forward pass, which gave them their touchdown.

"Block that kick! O boys, *tie* it at *least!*" North High begged.

But Central was having luck with kicks, and when the score was changed for public view, Central was one point ahead, its rooters dancing a merry snake dance, and its little band crashing as loud as possible.

Then, indeed, North High rooters began to encourage their team. "Gr-r-r-r-r——Tigers!" growled

and rumbled in the midst of the whole variety of yells and songs, as soon as the third quarter ended.

Now came the tug of war. Both teams were tired. Two North High men, more or less hurt, should have been taken out, but would not leave the field, could not, in fact, unless they were ready to hand the game to their foes. Mark noticed that Van limped a little till the plays began.

Every play was closely followed by the tense crowd of boys, girls, teachers and even parents. Central tried a pass which was caught by North High; yet North almost immediately lost its advantage. On their last down Jack Bryant attempted another run with the ball, but was downed before he had made the necessary three yards. A Central man, in trying to avoid interference, managed to land the ball farther back than it was before. Central yearned to make its gains larger; North High craved one more touchdown!

North High captain and quarterback consulted with the coach, whose arm went over Van's shoulders. Exhausted boys lay prone, to get energy for the next play. This quarter was giving much time out for recuperation.

It was getting late. The elders on the bleachers were growing restless, though held by the uncertainty of the game. But the interested boys and girls felt that they could stay until morning to see the finish.

And now the players were geting up, gathering, the lines forming once more. Mark watched the formation, but was doubtful. Ah, they had fooled them again! It was Van with the ball once more!

The tall young quarterback fairly leaped over the man who tried to down him. How Van got free, he never knew, for Central was doing some desperate work to stop him. He heard them calling again, "Van! Van! Van! Van! Van, rah!" as he escaped pursuit. It was not so easy to make speed now as at the first of the game. But it had to be done and it was done. Exhausted but satisfied, Vandyke Arvin lay upon the ball beyond the goal and listened to the cheers which applauded his fifty-five yard end run!

Two minutes later, time was called. The game was won, and the Pep Squad, Mark Hoyt in the lead this time, his guest forgotten, made a dash for Van, to carry him in triumph to the gym. "I'm getting you ready for the university team, boy," grinned the delighted coach.

CHAPTER II.

A SERIOUS PROBLEM.

VANDYKE ARVIN, known as Van to his friends, was sixteen years old and beginning his senior year in high school. His mother had died when he was ten. With his father and an elderly housekeeper, distantly related, he lived in an attractive home, well located in the town of Harbury. Van's father was his ideal and the closest relation existed between them.

High-minded, a lover of good literature and a man of wide interests, Mr. Arvin exerted an inspiring influence over his own son and Van's young friends, who were always welcome. The boys liked the quiet, gentlemanly man who could tell them so many interesting things and would sometimes include them in one of the cross-country hikes which he and Van loved to take. But Mark Hoyt, Van's most intimate friend, was the only one admitted to the amusing, if serious, practices in boxing, in which Mr. Arvin trained Van, for his safety, he said. And of late

Mr. Arvin had left this exercise to the boys, while he sat by and advised.

In the summer vacations from business which Mr. Arvin allowed himself, he and Van would go to some wild place remote from civilization or practically so, where they could camp, fish and enjoy nature in the way that they liked best.

After this background of companionship, the shock to Van may be imagined when, after the game with Central High, about which he was happily eager to tell his father, he went home to find that familiar confidant too ill to hear the story. Mark Hoyt and several of the other boys accompanied Van and swung gaily from the street car not far from Van's home. Laughing and talking, the group crossed the street together and walked along the concrete sidewalk.

But a large blue car was just leaving the curb in front of Van's home. It stopped, however, and a hand beckoned Van to its side. "Van,—a moment, please."

Van's face grew serious as he recognized their physician. Who could be ill,—Father, Cousin Emily? The boys' faces were sober as they, too, stopped and stood at a little distance from the car. "Your father has been suddenly taken ill, my lad," kindly said the dignified doctor. "I thought that it

would be better to warn you. It will be necessary for him to have quiet."

"How,—how is he?" stammered Van. "Is it serious?"

"Yes. I am sorry to be obliged to tell you that. Do not leave him. He wants you. I will come back this evening."

Van, with set lips, turned to his friends. But Mark, who had heard, spoke for them. "We'll go on home, Van. Sorry Mr. Arvin is sick, but perhaps it isn't as bad as the doctor thinks. I'll be around tonight to see you. So long, old chap."

The boys dispersed. Van, with straightened shoulders, walked quickly to the house, running lightly over the lawn to reach the back door instead of the front one.

Never would Van forget the events which followed. In a few days Mr. Arvin quietly went to sleep, and Van was left with the memory of his father's courage and a few whispered words of affection and cheer. These were a spur to his own courage and he prepared to face the future as bravely as he could.

There was opportunity to test at once how much of valor and poise was Van's own and how much of it had come from having Mr. Arvin as a background, for a new trouble met Van at the start. Mr. Arvin's partner, who had come at once to Van's practical

assistance during these difficult days, called him into consultation and informed him that his father's financial affairs were not in good condition.

"I hold your father's notes, Van," said he, "for quite a sum, and not long since I took over a mortgage on this house, one that your father gave when we had to raise money for the business. The mortgage practically covers its full value, for it would not bring the sum if put on the market today."

"Why, Mr. Swift!" exclaimed Van. "Father did not seem worried at all. Not long ago, he spoke of making some improvements on the house. We were going to have a small laboratory of our own."

"Your father was not as practical as he might have been," soothingly said Mr. Swift, a tall, dark-faced man with a suave manner. "I am sorry to bring you such news, Van, but you will find that it is true, and such matters have to be attended to, no matter how glad we should be to put them off. If you will give me the key to your father's desk, I will look for his will. If it is not there, we shall be obliged to get a court order to open his deposit box at the bank, where it may be. My lawyer will attend to all these matters for us, Van. Just leave it to me."

Van was glad that he had locked his father's desk, for he had no desire to have its contents first examined by Mr. Swift. He wondered, too, how Mr.

Swift knew that it was locked. He must have tried it some time when he was in the room alone.

"I will hunt up the key, Mr. Swift," Van replied, "but I prefer to open my father's desk first alone."

Mr. Swift hesitated. The lad had some sentiment about it, perhaps. Annoying! "I think, Van, that it is important for me to go through it at once. I am sorry, if some sentiment attaches to your opening it."

"Yes," said Van. "I can not see why I should not indulge that. I am, of course, my father's heir. I shall not destroy any important paper. I—I am quite puzzled, Mr. Swift, and I don't quite see how it comes about—" Van stopped, unwilling to say how suspicious he felt.

"Come to the office and I will show you the documents," sharply said Mr. Swift, who did not like Van's hesitation. It implied a lack of confidence. "Your father made bad investments, that is all. He borrowed of me and beside that, I assumed and paid debts incurred at one time in the business."

What should Van do? For some reason that he could not explain, he had not liked Mr. Swift's manner from the start of this conversation. With an uneasy eye on Mr. Arvin's desk in the little library where they sat, he continued more kindly. "Of course, my boy, you are not going to suffer. Your father told me some time ago that he had made me the executor of his will. I shall, of course, be your

guardian until you are of age. There will be something for you, I have no doubt, and if not, I will gladly see you through school. You can have a home here, your own room, with my wife and me, and as soon as you finish high school I can find a place for you in the office."

With this, Mr. Swift rose to go. "Telephone me, Van," he said, in a tone of authority that Van resented, "when you find the key. I think that I should be present when you open the desk. These things should all be conducted in a legal way. By the way, as you know, Mrs. Swift is away; but upon her return we shall take steps to rent our place and arrange to move in here before cold weather. Your room can be kept as it is, and you will feel at home."

Politely the stricken Van showed Mr. Swift out, realizing as he did so that it was perhaps the last time that he would be host in his own home.

"By the way," said Mr. Swift at the door, "did your father keep a diary? If so his transactions might be recorded there, or possibly there is a private record in his deposit box."

"Father used to keep a little notebook when we were out on our trips, but aside from that I never knew of any diary, Mr. Swift."

"It is very likely, then, that his books in his desk at the office are all the record that he kept. I will show them to you when you come down the next

time. I am sorry that you must think of these things so soon. I should advise you, however, to attend school this morning; or if you prefer it, come to the office with me."

"I have not had my breakfast yet Mr. Swift. I overslept and Cousin Emily would not waken me. I only just came down as you rang the bell. I think that I can come to the office later, if you would like to have me do so."

"Very well, Van,—at your earliest convenience, then. Goodbye. Don't take things too seriously, Van."

"I understand, Mr. Swift."

Van felt dazed. He had not been like himself since the shock and the swifty moving sad events of these last days. But he must rouse himself now. How clear it was that Mr. Swift wanted to prevent his investigating his father's desk. What did Mr. Swift fear that he would find? Yes, he would go to the office, but first he would go through the desk!

From the hall Van turned into the living room, so pleasant, so full of everything that reminded him of his father. He sat down in his father's big chair by the window and saw some of his friends passing on their way to school. The scent from a vase of roses and delphiniums on the table reached him. There, too, lay some of his father's books, with one

that he must take back to the public library. It must be overdue now.

He had never liked Mr. Swift. He knew that his father's attitude was that of a generous older man who wanted to help a younger man succeed. So now Mr. Swift had everything in his own hands. Poor Dad! But something was wrong. He was sure of it.

For some minutes Van sat thinking it out. Then he jumped up, ran upstairs lightly for so big a lad and called to his cousin whose white hair and strong, kind face appeared in the hall from the door of her own room. "Cousin Emily, I want to talk things over with you right away, if you can spare the time."

"What I am doing can wait, and you must have some breakfast, Van. Come. You can talk to me while I make your toast."

"All right. I'm not hungry, but I've a lot to do. Wait a minute. Do you know where the key to Father's desk is? I can't remember what I did with it. I locked the desk. Dad asked me to."

There were some keys on your dresser, Van and I dropped them all into your drawer. I put all your father's keys there, too, those to his office and desk downtown and the house keys,—"

"To his *desk downtown?*"

"I suppose so. I heard him speak of locking the drawers in his 'big desk.' He only mentioned hav-

ing everything locked up and then never seemed to give business a thought."

"He was unable to see Mr. Swift, after he came back from that little trip out of town. I'm glad of it. Cousin Emily, something is all wrong!"

While Van's cousin in motherly fashion set a good breakfast before him, Van told her in detail all that Mr. Swift had said. Quietly and soberly she listened, agreeing with him that it was peculiar, to say the least.

"Your father did not act as if there were anything to worry over. He could have told us at the first of his illness, you know. Mr. Swift always had his eye on this house. He wanted your father to sell it to him last year. That did not look like taking it for the amount of a mortgage."

"Well, whatever it is, I suppose that he can take it all if he has it fixed up. Perhaps Father signed something and thought it was something else. He trusted Mr. Swift. I'm sure that he really is my guardian; but, Cousin Emily, I'm not going to stay around a minute!"

"O Van! Not graduate?"

"No. I'll go off somewhere and put myself through school!"

"Don't be too hasty, Van. Remember what your father used to say about the 'long purpose.' It's a poor beginning,—running away."

Frowning Van broke off a piece of toast and nodded assent. "But I know that I'll never stand it to be here with Mr. and Mrs. Swift!"

"It would be hard; but if you finish high school, you may be able to work your way through college, and your father wanted you to go to college. Why not go to see your high school principal? You know how he told you to call on him for anything, and he is an old friend of your father's."

Mrs. Wayne looked with affection at the troubled face opposite.

"Thanks for the suggestion, Cousin Emily. I will do it. Honestly now, do you think that I ought to put myself in Mr. Swift's hands and do just what he tells me?"

"No, Van, I do not. I'd investigate."

"Good for you! I didn't expect any sympathy on my sudden resolve not to stay here with him. I can't stand it, that's all!"

"Don't say that, Van. It might prove best. People have stood worse things. But it does seem to me that there may be some other way. Could you consider staying with Grace and me? Perhaps a houseful of kiddies would do you good."

"There! I've never thought of what you are going to do! It just shows how selfish I am!"

"I shall stay by the ship here, Van, as long as it will do you any good. But Grace has been wanting

me for a long time and I shall like to have a hand in bringing up my grand-babies. The house is large and there would be room for you. I think that we can get Mr. Swift's consent. And by the way, Van, I shall see to it that you have the best of your father's furniture."

"Perhaps it all belongs to Mr. Swift. I don't know yet how much we owe him."

"I don't know much about the law, but some personal things and your mother's certainly belong to you. Ask Mr. Walters about it."

"I'll put it right through, Cousin Emily," said Van, with determination, rising from the table. "Thanks for the good breakfast; I feel like making another touchdown! But first I'll go through the desk for fear Mr. Swift comes back. Please do not answer the bell if it is he."

"I'll not answer it at all, Van. Then you will not be interrupted."

CHAPTER III.

THE DESK AND A DECISION.

It was hard to go through his father's desk in this way, but perhaps the feeling of necessity for haste kept Van from yielding to those which assailed him on opening it. There lay an unfinished letter in his father's hand, the fountain pen upon it, as it had been dropped. Van's teeth set together and he covered his face with his hands for a moment. Then he picked up the pen, fitted its cover properly upon it and put it in his pocket. After reading the letter, he folded it, selected an envelop for it and put it also in his pocket. He would add a few lines and send the letter to its destination, for it was to a personal friend.

The desk was in excellent order and not overly full, for the bulk of business correspondence came to the office. In one pigeonhole there were a few unanswered personal letters, a bundle of answered ones retained in another. One packet had a memorandum on top, written in his father's hand. This gave the subjects of the letters and referred to his per-

sonal business affairs. Van laid this aside to be read later.

A package of long envelopes revealed more business affairs in which Van was interested, and one contained a copy of the will, so marked.

One drawer contained only writing paper and envelopes, with some stamps and postcards. Another,—but Van caught his breath a little as he saw the field notes which his father had taken on their last tramp together. But there were no mementos here to be kept from Mr. Swift's curious eyes. Those Van had already found in his father's room when at Mrs. Wayne's suggestion he had selected what he wanted to keep before he should be obliged to go back to school.

Eagerly Van looked at what promised to be a diary, but it was only of notes taken on one of their summer vacations. It lay on top of two larger books. The first of these contained accounts of expenses, household, personal. The second, a neat, leather-bound book, had at the top of its first page the word "Statement," and Van saw in a moment that this was what he wanted and what Mr. Swift had hoped to find, the account of business and personal transactions, with a list of property owned, including bonds in bank.

The envelope marked "Copy of Will" Van put back for Mr. Swift to find. The packets of letters

he read, as quickly as possible, replacing all but a few which seemed to refer to something of which he had not heard, a purchase of property and a recent investment. It meant little to Van, for it had already come over him as he sat at the desk how impossible it would be to keep things as they were, and how inevitable it was, even leaving Mr. Swift out of the picture, that the home was broken.

The letter which his father had been answering Van left, with some fresh paper on the front of the desk. So Mr. Swift might find Mr. Arvin's desk. He locked it up and put the key in his pocket. The apparently important letters and the two account books he made into a neat package, with a photograph of Mr. Arvin for which Mr. Walters, the principal, had asked. These proofs of whatever his father's property was he would get out of his hands as soon as possible and into hands that were safe and reliable.

"All right, Cousin Emily," Van called from the foot of the stairs to where she was passing in the hall above. "I found what I wanted, but never a word to Mr. Swift. I'm going to see Mr. Walters now. I want to leave my papers with him, if he will have them and then we shall see how far my fine guardian dares to go!"

Mrs. Wayne was sorry to hear the bitter tone in Van's voice but she looked over the bannisters with

a smile. "A good idea, Van, not to have them. If asked, you have nothing to show. If Mr. Swift comes back or telephones, shall I tell him that you have gone to the high school?"

"Yes, please. He will think that I have taken his advice."

Van met no one who stopped him in his rapid walk to the school building and Mr. Walters himself opened the door of his office when Van tapped.

"Glad to see you, Van, he said heartily, with a kind hand on Van's shoulder. "Are you coming back to us now?"

"No, Mr. Walters, though I'd give a good deal to go back where things were. I came to you for a little advice about my affairs. I couldn't wait, for my father's partner talked to me this morning,—and I don't trust him!" Van blurted this out vehemently, and added, "that is why I came in school hours. I thought that you would be in your office now."

"Tell me all about it, Van," replied Mr. Walters, who was accustomed to hear rash remarks from boys and girls.

Van pulled himself together to give as clear an account as possible of what Mr. Swift had said to him and of what he had found in the desk. "I want to leave this with you, Mr. Walters, if you will take care of it for me, and perhaps you can spare time to go over it with me. I am not going to live with Mr.

Swift and his wife unless I must; and perhaps you can tell me what to do."

Mr. Walters looked thoughtfully at Van. "It is curious, Van, but if you had not come to me this morning, I would have called you up a little later than this, at lunch time."

Van's steady, rather deep-set blue eyes looked at his principal in surprise, as he waited for further explanation. How glad he was that he had come. Here was a man with ideas like those of his father. Mr. Walters was square and high-minded!

"I have a letter here, Van, from one of my old friends of my college days. He is a professor of science at our *alma mater*. With some other scientists he is about to start on a cruise and he wrote me to ask if there were any of my boys who would like the advantage of the trip. It seems odd that he can not find one of the college lads for the purpose, but it is probable that he himself is not willing to interrupt their work for the coming year, and he is having his sabbatical year. Often there are high school boys who for one reason or another drop out. So he suggested in this letter.

"My friend is a botanist and a young instructor who will accompany him is a sort of a bird man. That would just suit you. They want, Dr. Hill wrote, a good strong lad, who can handle a boat, make himself generally useful and take an interest

in the object of the expedition. I haven't the least idea about the length of this particular cruise, but it looks interesting. Some of the party are more or less amateurs. You can handle a boat, can't you?"

"Yes, sir. I can row and paddle, and one summer Dad and I had a little launch up on the lakes."

"I thought of you the moment that I read the letter. Of course, if your father were living, rather than spare you, or interrupt your course in school, he might not have thought it best for you to go. But now it seems to me that it would be of advantage to you, better than a year of schooling, if you do not mind the risks. You will be associated with a man who will be an inspiration in the line of science, and I fancy that there will be some fun included, unless he has changed a good deal. I know that your father would want you to get your mind off your grief and go on living as courageously as he always did."

"That is what he said,—'courage,' sir." Van would have liked to tell Mr. Walters more of what his father had said, but he could not trust himself to speak further now.

"Mr. Swift has probably nothing personal against you, Van. Why not try to get his permission for this? He may be glad to have you out of his way, and he need not know until after you have gone that I have any record of affairs. I will consult my lawyer and see what can be done. There is really not time

for you to wait, a good thing, perhaps. The *Black Skimmer* sails shortly. Here is the letter, Van. By the way, can you shoot, and have you a pistol? You may meet something to deal with in the jungles. Florida, the islands, the Gulf of Mexico and possibly South America seem to be before you." Mr. Walters was smiling at the way Van's face had lit up with interest.

"I was going to ask you where we were going,—and the *Black Skimmer* sounds fine. I always wanted to see a black skimmer."

"Sure enough,—the black skimmer is a bird, isn't it?" Mr. Walters was smiling at Van's unconscious "we." The invitation was already accepted, it seemed.

"So far as shooting is concerned, my father never would hunt exactly, but he taught me to shoot at a mark. I began with bows and arrows that Dad used to make for me when I was a little chap. Then, later he taught me to handle a gun and revolver."

"That is well, then. And I had forgotten about your being a 'scout.' A boy that has taken the scout oath and knows the scout laws is a good one to recommend. You notice what my friend writes,—that he does not want any cigarette fiend, but a sound, wholesome boy with a liking for outdoor life."

Van read the letter with great interest. "I can

get ready right away, Mr. Walters. May I take this letter to show to Mr. Swift? I am going to the office this afternoon, and I will call you up as soon as I get his permission to go. I rather think that he will be glad to get rid of me."

"Let me know, then, and I will telegraph Dr. Hill that you are coming."

Keen with inward excitement, Van hurried away from the school, bringing home the first bright smiles that Mrs. Wayne had seen him wear of late. She was both stunned and pleased by Van's news, but thoroughly approved of his decision to go.

"You will not have any trouble with Mr. Swift about getting away, I'm sure. Hand him the key of the desk and keep him busy telling him about the proposed trip. If you have Mr. Walters to look after your interests you need not worry. If anything can be done, he will do it."

"Yes, Cousin Emily, though if he has it fixed up, it's very doubtful. But I don't care. I'll have this great trip, and perhaps I can get into college next year anyhow, or go somewhere to make my own way. Time enough to think of that."

Van could scarcely eat any lunch, but knew that Mr. Swift would not be at the office till a little later. Cousin Emily tempted him with a piece of warm apple pie for dessert. To that he did full justice and

then he flew up to his room to select what he would need.

Enthusiasm ebbed a little when Van started for the office, but he braced himself for a possibly disagreeable interview, and was pleasantly disappointed. Perhaps Mr. Swift's greeting would not have been quite so warm had it not been for the presence of a stranger in the office.

"Ah, Van, did you want to see me?"

"Just a moment, sir. Here is the key of which you spoke, and I would like to have you read this letter and tell me if I may go. I am very much interested, and Mr. Walters said that he thought of me at once when he received it."

Mr. Swift glanced through the letter. "Fine, Van. Of course you may go, especially if Walters thinks that it will do you no harm to put off your senior work. Go ahead and get ready. I'll be up this evening to have a look at your father's papers. We'll put the legal affairs through tomorrow. I am busy now and I'll see you this evening."

With great relief Van once more hurried homeward to make plans with Cousin Emily, and to go on with his pleasant task of selecting his outfit. The more he thought of his new opportunity the more wonderful it seemed to him. He called Mr. Walters to announce to him in tones of scarcely suppressed eagerness that he might go. The matter of prop-

erty, Mr. Swift's unfair plans,—everything dwindled in comparison.

These thoughts went through Van's mind as, in dollars that he had in his savings account. Perhaps he ought to hand those over to Mr. Swift, if they owed him so much. He would ask Mr. Walters.

These thougths went through Van's mind as, in boy fashion, he pulled out the contents of his closet and went through his bureau drawers. There were his high fishing boots. They would be just the thing; and his father had bought them for him only this past summer. They must go, also his hiking shoes and high leather puttees. Mr. Walters had suggested a steamer trunk, but he would certainly need a separate kit of some sort for the expeditions of the party. What luck that he knew about such things! His camping outfit needed few additions. Should he take his father's rifle or his own? He hesitated. But he might lose his father's, and it was no better. He would stop looking over his clothes to clean his revolver and rifle.

A bright thought occurred to him, and he slid down the bannisters in his haste to find his father's fine fishing rod. He "bet" that the old professor didn't have as good a one!

Landing with a leap, he startled his cousin thinking that some new calamity had occurred. But she was glad to see him so interested and pointed out

the kitchen closet as the repository of the rod and tackle.

"Say, Cousin Emily, this trip is bigger than anything I ever *dreamed* of!" Van exclaimed, as in his enthusiasm he tossed overshoes and all sorts of things, for whose presence in the closet he and his father were responsible, far out upon the kitchen floor. "I'll put 'em back," said Van, conscious of the disorder.

"Go on," said Mrs. Wayne. "You are too excited to get anything straight. While you have it all out, see if there is anything else that you will need. Your ponchos and rubber hats are hanging there, too."

While Van selected an armful to carry upstairs, he and his cousin discussed the buying of the trunk and various other matters which must be attended to at once. "All right, Cousin Emily, if you think that I'll need to dress up on the ship sometimes, I'll take my best clothes, too, and get my white sport trousers pressed. But remember that this is no girl's trousseau!"

A few more characteristic remarks before Van left the kitchen put his cousin in smiles. "Poor lad," she said to herself as he bounded upstairs again, "he will be like himself after a while." And over the railing upstairs Van called to her, "I'm going to be away, Cousin Emily, when Mr. Swift comes this evening to look through the desk."

Events moved rapidly. The legal business was put through. Mr. Swift seemed satisfied. No embarrassing statement was found in either desk or deposit box. With apparent generosity, he told Van to keep his money and bonds, saying that if anything was left for him he would let him know. "If you get stranded anywhere, my boy, telegraph me for funds to get home," he offered, and Van thanked him.

Again Van went over to the high school to bid Mr. Walters goodbye and take lunch with his friend Mark Hoyt. Mark had been spending every possible minute with Van since he had heard the news.

At lunch Van said goodbye to a host of jolly boys and girls who told him that they were envious of his luck, but glad that he had the chance. "I don't know what the old team is going to do without you," said Mark, "but as things are, it's a lot better for you. I'll be around with the gang to see you off."

When Van went back home from the gay farewells of school, his cousin was not there and he wandered through the rooms thinking that it was perhaps for the last time. It was, indeed, the last time that he would see the familiar things in the familiar places, if the Swifts moved in and took possession. A box of books and a trunk, marked with his name, were stored in the attic already. Mrs. Wayne had promised to attend to the rest of his personal prop-

erty, with any keepsakes that he had not gathered together.

In his room, Van locked the trunk that would go with him. He set his teeth together as he tucked into his grip a photograph of each of his parents and the little testament that he and his father carried on their expeditions. "Maybe I can't stand it to look at 'em," he thought, "but they'll be there."

Mr. Swift drove Mrs. Wayne and Van to the station. They found Mr. Walters and his wife there, as well as a large group of boys and girls who defied convention by giving the high school yells in Van's honor. They "rah-rahed" for Van, gave their North High cheers, and made up a new cheer on the spot.

"Zooda-ga-leek, zooda-ga-lo,
Zip-bang, just so!
Ain't got no quarter back,—
Van Arvin's gotta go!"

The crowd repeated it with zest, in spite of Van's laughing embarrassment, and one of the gay senior girls added another couplet:

"Zooda-ga-leek, zooda-ga-lo.
Zip-bang, just so!
Boo-hoo-hoo! Boo-hoo-hoo!
Aint it a shame for Van to go!"

Van was almost overcome with all this nonsense, but it helped mightily, he thought. There was no chance for a sober goodbye, in spite of the regrets expressed by the jolly yells composed in his honor. Laughing, he promised this one and that one an alligator or a snake skin for a belt; and when the train was called, several of the boys rushed with him through the iron gates, boarded the Pullman and pretended that they were going to be carried off "by mistake."

The elders, after bidding Van goodbye, stood back and let the young people have their way. Mr. Swift stroked his chin and was thoughtful. Mr. Walters, taking his wife to their car, said, "By the way, Swift, I'm going to drop into the office tomorrow."

Mrs. Wayne's eyes were moist, but she was planning the work before her in looking after Van's property, and packing to go to her daughter's as soon as the Swifts should take over the house.

Meantime, Van Arvin in the Pullman car, going through the night and watching the lights of his home town disappear, felt more a sense of uplift than of depression. Everything would be settled in some way. What if he had no home? Why should he care for it without Dad? He would make a fight for a future such as his father wanted for him. Whatever happened, he would play the man.

CHAPTER IV

VAN A TEMPORARY KNIGHT

Tired with the excitement of departure, Van fell asleep quickly in the upper berth which he had taken because it was less expensive. His precious funds were in a belt which should be worn day and night. No telling what might happen. His services would pay his way for the present trip, but perhaps he would stay permanently in the tropics, if he ever reached them, and if he liked them.

It was late when he awoke, almost every one else either settled for the day or eating breakfast in the dining car. He found the hot cakes good and ordered recklessly with a boy's good appetite. At the size of the bill he was somewhat horrified, but he paid it cheerfully and left a suitable tip for the waiter on the tray, as he had seen his father do.

Coming back to his seat, through the rocking cars, Van dimly saw that there was another occupant in the seat opposite his beside the rather handsome traveling man who had sat there the night before and had exchanged a word or two with Van.

He was now showing rather marked attentions to a young girl. Van received an impression of sunny brown hair and a pair of dark eyes that looked up at him as he came down the aisle. She wore a straight, simple frock of a golden-brown silk and was trying to read rather than to talk.

Van soon became absorbed in one of his own magazines, though he was conscious of a man's voice across the aisle and he recalled having roused enough in the night to know that the porter was helping some one to a berth opposite his own, where a light was on for some time. The little girl must have gotten on the train then, Van thought.

Presently Van tired of reading and drew out the telegram and letter from Dr. Hill, which Mr. Walters had given him by way of his introduction. He read them over, put them back in his pocket and gave himself over to pleasant anticipations, when his attention was called to the two people across the aisle. The young girl had drawn away as close to the window as possible. She held up her book, but the man was bending near to talk, his arm along the back of the seat and near her shoulder. Van saw her give a troubled glance at her seatmate. Then she rose, with a few words, and made a place for herself on the seat opposite, taking her bag on her lap, since part of the seat was occupied by the coat and a small bag which belonged to the man.

Immediately he reached for the bag which she held. "That is not necessary. I think that I can put it elsewhere."

But the girl held it, shaking her head. "I want it," she replied. "Thank you, sir, but it is not necessary for you to do anything for me."

Van thought that she looked a little frightened, and when the persistent individual leaned over to say something pleasant and persuasively gallant, Van reached across the aisle and touched his arm. "Pardon me," he said. "Wouldn't you enjoy looking at scenery from the observation car with me?"

Angrily the man turned and Van met his look with a steady one of his own. "No," said the man shortly, but he leaned back in seat and made no further effort to talk to the young girl. Presently he rose and left the seat and the car.

Van had no idea whether there were an observation car on the train or not, but he smiled a little as he returned to his own reading again and saw that the young girl across the aisle was making herself comfortable once more. Van was a little shy with girls, though there were a few of his classmates, of the unsentimental type, with whom he could have a good time at class affairs or school entertainments. He had no idea of making the acquaintance of this one, but as a good scout he did not intend to see her annoyed. One appreciative glance she had given

him, but she felt safer, it was easily seen, to have no dealings with any one. He wondered if he would have the courage to suggest that she take his seat, for he had the whole section to himself. He would gladly exchange with her for the day. But Van could not quite bring himself to take the initiative there. After all, it was not his affair.

At lunch Van was sitting beside an elderly lady, who was taking an interest in him and conversing, when the same young girl was shown to a seat opposite them, the only one left unoccupied in the diner at the time. She busied herself with the menu and her order.

"So you are going on a voyage," the lady was saying to Van. "I hope that you will have good companions. There are many dangers for young men and boys."

"Yes, madam; I'm sure that you are right," answered Van, half embarrassed by this remark, and particularly when he saw that the young lady opposite could scarcely repress a smile, doubtless at the tone of the elder lady. "I'm going with a party of scientists," Van added, "so I'm pretty sure to be looked after."

The dark eyes gave Van a surprised glance, but they looked quickly away.

"What did you say was the name of the vessel?" asked the lady.

"The *Black Skimmer*. Doesn't that sound attractive? I can scarcely wait to see her."

"May you have a safe voyage," kindly said the elderly lady. "Now if you will let me past you,—" Van rose to let the lady by and as a seat was vacated on the other side of the table, Van and the young girl were left alone.

With a blush the young girl spoke, as soon as the others had withdrawn. "I want to thank you for speaking to that perfect stranger who was talking to me and being so horrid. I'm not sure that I would have the courage to speak to you, but when you told this lady about your going on the *Black Skimmer*, I was so surprised and glad. Mr. Abernethy is my uncle and he is the one who is providing the vessel. I am going, too."

"You are!" exclaimed the astonished Van. "Why, will there be ladies on this trip?"

"Just my cousin and I, and perhaps Mrs. Abernethy after we get to Florida. Are you a scientist already?"

"No,—I'm just going as an assistant to Dr. Hill and Mr. Collier. My name is Vandyke Arvin. Would you care to read the telegram and letter, which are introduction enough, I suppose, though I carry a letter from my high school principal to Dr. Hill?"

"I'm sure that you look as if you could be trusted;

but it would be interesting to see the letter, if you like. And I wonder if you won't help me again. That gentleman saw a note to my cousin Juliet that I dropped, one directed to the *Black Skimmer;* so he insists that he will get a taxi and take me there, and of course I can't do that. It worries me so!"

"I am sorry that you are being annoyed. No, of course it would be dangerous for you to take a taxi with any one whom you do not know. Will no one meet you?"

"I am not sure."

"Then, if you will trust me, I will see that you get safely to the ship. Are you Miss Abernethy, then?"

"Oh, excuse me. I forgot that I hadn't told you my name. I'm Betty Carruthers. My mother was Mr. Abernethy's sister."

"I see. Well, now I can suggest what I wanted to suggest before, but I was half afraid that you would think me forward. Suppose you let me bring all your baggage over to my section and I will sit with the interested gentleman and keep him in order."

"You can sit with me, if you think that the conductor will approve the change. I *would* like to get away from the other place!"

"I'll fix it up with the conductor. It may be that the man is only what we boys call 'fresh,' but I'd like to see you away from him. I'll handle it when we get off the train. Don't worry about it."

"Oh, I can't tell you what a relief it is, Mr. Arvin! I'm not used to traveling anyway. This is a wonderful chance for me to have a sea voyage. I have been looking forward to it and I'm glad to meet some one that likes it, too."

Van took Miss Carruthers back to their car, arranged her baggage in his section and put his own bag out of sight. As several people in the car looked interested, Van explained to his new friend that he would not sit there until after he had seen the conductor, and perhaps not at all. It depended upon what seemed best. "Take up all the room and curl up with your pillow, for a nap if you can. Wasn't that you who came in in the middle of the night?"

"Yes, it was, and I do feel sleepy. I can't tell you how I thank you." Betty laughed as she saw how Van arranged the luggage and coats in order to leave no chance for an unwelcome guest. With her pocketbook safely in her hands, she took his advice and napped drowsily, with half conscious intervals, most of the afternoon. Van saw the conductor, explaining how the annoyance did not seem to be serious and how they came to find out that they were going to the same ship.

The conductor was more interested in the *Black Skimmer* than in the rest of Van's information, and read the telegram and letter, which Van produced when he found that they would be acceptable. "I

always wanted to go to sea," mused the conductor, "but here I am, too old for any change, and only getting a smell of the water occasionally in the East You are a lucky lad. Look after the little girl, but I'd advise you to keep out of the gentleman's seat. There's another seat behind where there is only an old lady who is getting out pretty soon.

When Van went back to his own car, he saw in his section a slim little girl asleep and opposite her across the aisle, a man who wore no pleasant expression as Van passed, though he did not look at him. The old lady was just getting her multitudinous belongings together for leaving the car and was very nervous about the porter's coming. She, too, must have thought that Van looked trustworthy, for as he came along, she leaned out and spoke to him. "Will the porter be sure to come for my bags?" she asked. "I get off at the next station." Her old hands trembled and Van felt sorry for her.

"I'm sure that you will not be forgotten," said he, "but I will stay right here to help you in case he does not come."

The porter came, but Van helped the old lady off and finding that there was a stop long enough to attach some eatables, he ran to the station restaurant for sandwiches and other things, coming back with several sacks, too late to run back to his own car before the train started. He boarded it at the front

and went back through the cars, grinning as he saw Betty sitting straight up and welcoming him with a bright smile. "I saw you get off, or start out with that lady," she said, "and I was worried. I thought that you had been left."

"I thought that *you* were asleep," laughed Van, sitting on the arm of the seat with his packages in his hand.

"I was, but I heard the lady talking to you, I suppose, and I woke up all at once. You got on in front, I imagine?"

"Yes. How would you like a picinc supper? Or would it offend propriety not to go to the dining car?"

"I think that a picnic would be lovely. I was just thinking how far it was to the diner and how lazy I am. Come on."

Betty Carruthers reached over to clear the other seat of her "traps," as she called them. She spread Van's newspaper, which he had left there, on part of the seat for the packages, and Van occupied the rest. "Help me spread the array," suggested Van, "or shall we eat them from the sacks? I have oranges, apples and grapes, sandwiches of several kinds, a small pie and some doughnuts. If I could only have brought you some coffee,—the best I could do was ginger ale!"

Betty thought that it would be better to help

themselves from the sacks and they began at once on sandwiches. It was a very informal way of making acquaintance, but they felt that they had been properly introduced. Before the picnic meal was over they had decided that Mr. Arvin and Miss Carruthers were too formal for people of their age, especially as they were to be on the same ship for so long. It was Betty and Van, though Van usually said, "Miss Betty."

The resentful man in the other section eyed them curiously from time to time. Van had noticed the conductor's speaking to him for a moment and he felt that the conductor was giving him an explanation of the move on the ground of a common destination. But as they made ready to get off, the man put himself between Van and Betty in the aisle and said something to her. "Oh, no," Van heard her answer. "I never meant to go with you, though I thank you. The young man is going to the same boat. Van!"

"Right here, Miss Betty," Van answered, "step into the section ahead and wait for me."

Thus, without any trouble, they descended from the train together. No one seemed to be waiting for Betty. Van had never been here before, but he inquired the way to the taxis and there they saw a worried looking man pacing up and down by a wait-

ing taxi. Van was just about to hail a taxi when the gentleman saw Betty and came toward them.

"I am wondering if this can be Elizabeth Carruthers," said he, looking doubtfully at Van, who was carrying both, his own bag and Betty's, her magazine and book and box of candy.

"It is, and this is Uncle, I'm sure," prettily replied Betty, holding out her hand to meet her uncle's. "This is Vandyke Arvin, who is sailing on the *Black Skimmer,* too, with the scientific party."

"Glad to meet you, Arvin. Hill told me about you. I knew that I had missed being at the Depot when the train pulled in; but I was quite sure that Betty would turn up here. Get right into this taxi. The baggage of both of you is already on the *Black Skimmer.* What do you think of that for a name, Betty?"

"Oh, it's wonderfully mysterious, Uncle!"

"She is no beauty, Betty,—a queer old boat, but she might be worse and she's safe enough."

Through the night and the brilliant lights of New York, they sped toward the pier where the *Black Skimmer* waited.

CHAPTER V.

THE BLACK SKIMMER.

Lights and shadows fell in fantastic outlines upon the water. The dark hulk of the *Black Skimmer* loomed largely before Van's interested gaze. He followed Mr. Abernethy and his niece as they boarded the vessel, but scarcely listened to Betty's eager voice as she talked to her uncle.

"The *Black Skimmer,* Arvin," said Mr. Abernethy, turning to Van, "is a freighter made over into a passenger vessel in part. I hadn't seen her, but took a chance on the word of a friend. There's room for improvement, but she's staunch and safe."

There was much activity on the decks. Van was relieved of the luggage which he carried and Mr. Abernethy took him, with Betty, to the large, main cabin, which was brilliantly lighted and prettily furnished. Several groups of people were about. Mr. Abernethy led the way to the piano, where a young lady in evening dress was drumming a little and talking to a young man, who leaned upon the piano. A rather serious looking lady sat in a rocking chair not

far from the two. She rose, as Mr. Abernethy approached, but he addressed the girl at the piano.

"Juliet, here is your cousin, Betty Carruthers."

The slender young lady whirled around, showing the front locks of her satiny black bob, a face whose eyebrows, cheeks and lips were just a little more deeply colored than nature had made them, and eyes as dark as Betty's, though with a different expression. If Juliet were about Betty's age, she was decidedly more mature, Van decided. She must be at least seventeen. Van felt out of place and uninterested, but he stood politely while Juliet offered her hand and cheek to Betty. "I'm awfully glad to see you, Betty, and I hope that you will like the trip with us," she said. Van was then introduced and presented also to "Mr. Gary," whom Juliet addressed as "Dicky."

The serious lady proved to be a chaperon, Mrs. Jerome, whom Betty had not mentioned to Van and of whom she probably did not know until now; but Mr. Abernethy left Betty to these friends and drew Van away toward a group of gentlemen who were talking as if deeply interested in the subject of their conversation. Ah, this was what Van wanted. Here he would find the scientists.

"That short, slight man is Dr. Hill, Arvin," Mr. Abernethy was saying as they crossed the room. The heavier man that is showing him some slide or other

is Dr. Davis. He is from another college. It's an assembly of the elect, I can tell you, my lad."

Mr. Abernethy was smiling as he said this, but Van approached hesitatingly, not waiting to interrupt proceedings. Mr. Abernethy obviously felt no such hesitation. "Dr. Hill," said he, "here is a young man whom you will be glad to see, I think. This is Vandyke Arvin, biological and botanical assistant to the greatest expedition of modern times!"

Van could not help smiling broadly at Mr. Abernethy's speech. It helped his embarrassment considerably, for he was impressed with the occasion and the distinguished company, all of whom looked up and at last for a moment focused eyes upon him.

Dr. Hill, active, keen-eyed, left the side of the other professor to shake hands with Van and welcome him. I am glad to see you, sir," said he. "Walters telegraphed that he had found just the young man for me. I see that you look big enough and strong enough for our trips. I shall depend upon you a great deal, and I hope that your interest will be such that you will find it an opportunity."

"Oh, yes, sir!" earnestly Van replied. "I will do my best for you."

"I do not doubt it. Will you meet our group now, or would you prefer to find your cabin?"

"I would only interrupt them, Dr. Hill, and I would like to go to my cabin unless you have some

instructions for me now. By the way, let me give you the letter of introduction from Mr. Walters." Van slipped his hand into his inner pocket for the letter and handed it to Dr. Hill.

"We scarcely need it, do we?" smiled Dr. Hill in a friendly way. "No, I have no instructions yet. Indeed there is little for you to do until we begin our trips away from the vessel. See me about ten o'clock tomorrow morning, Arvin. Good night."

So this was the man whom he was to serve! Van was already a loyal assistant. How fortunate that Dr. Hill was what he was,—kindly, keen, fine,—hurrah for science and the voyage! He had seen charts in the hands of two of the men in that group. Adventure, excitement, what might not be ahead of him? Briskly Van walked about on the upper deck, not caring to join the family group again, but curious about the vessel and its captain and crew. He had no idea whom to ask about his cabin, but as he happened to meet the captain, a large, stalwart, rather heavy man of at least middle age, he ventured to ask him how he should find his cabin.

Grimly the captain scanned him from head to foot in the light which happened to fall upon them both. "Yes. You are the lad, then, that has the cabin not far from Dr. Hill. You look older than I expected."

"People usually take me to be a year or two older than I am. I am sixteen, sir."

The captain called one of the men upon the deck and told him to show Van to his cabin, giving directions. "Your baggage has been put there," briefly said the captain, walking away.

Down the stairs to his cabin Van went, finding his steamer trunk, his kit and the luggage which he had carried with him, all there. He received his key, but was not yet ready to be confined in any little cabin. Locking his door, he ascended again to the upper deck, strolling around its sides, standing in bow or stern. The lights and buildings of New York, the varied craft at its piers, the sluggishly moving water, the sky with scudding clouds that sometimes hid the moon, a mere crescent,—all these sights impressed Van. He might not see New York for a long time, if ever. But he was too keenly interested in the coming trip to regret any sight-seeing here.

It was an effort to perform the proper act of courtesy to Mr. Abernethy and enter the main cabin again, but it was growing late. The family was still there, also the group of scientists, though more scattered. Mr. Abernethy was near the door talking to the captain, who left as Van entered.

"I will say good night, Mr. Abernethy," said Van, "and thank you for everything."

"Not much to thank me for so far," returned Mr. Abernethy, placing his hand on the shoulder of a little lad who was standing close to him. The child's

eyes were blinking, as if he were having difficulty to keep awake, but he stood with his hands in his pockets and feet apart. "Bobby," continued Mr. Abernethy, "this is the quarterback whose name we saw in the paper."

Van looked puzzled. His name in the paper? What paper could it be? One of the eastern papers? But Bobby spoke at once, all evidence of sleepiness vanishing at once.

"Say, you ought to've seen what they said in the report of high school games. Your team beat this afternoon, too. But they had an awful time, 'count of missing their regular quarterback, Vandyke Arvin. Their new one is getting on to it, though."

"That's funny," said Van. "How did it happen that you saw it? And how did you know my name?"

"Mr. Collier asked Dr. Hill if that wasn't the name of the boy who was going to help him. The paper blew over the side of the ship afterwards."

"Your fame has preceded you, you see," jovially added Mr. Abernethy.

"You are making fun of me," laughed Van. "Bobby, would you like to see through my microscope some time?"

"Oh, yes. I'll be ready right after breakfast tomorrow."

"Not so fast, Bobby," said his father. "Dr. Hill may want him."

"Some time tomorrow," said Van, smiling down on the manly little chap. "Good night." He cast a look at the other group, but no one was looking in his direction except Betty. To her he gave a quick salute and left the cabin.

In the night Van was dreaming of a giant black skimmer on whose back he was riding, when he wakened to find that the vessel was moving. Wondering sleepily whether he would prove a good sailor or not, he turned over, to sleep again till morning.

CHAPTER VI.

A QUEER SHIP.

LONG before the time for breakfast, the eagerly interested Van was awake and up, hastening to get on deck once more. It was new to him to keep his feet on a vessel of this sort, and it was rough this morning. The sun was just coming up, the mists beginning to clear away. Clouds wore rosy colors and the boy was delighted as he realized at last he was on the ocean, the voyage definitely begun.

A few, strong-winged birds flew overhead. Glimpses of dark, turning bodies and tails with spreading points, at some little distance in the water, indicated to Van that he was seeing a little school of dolphins, or porpoises. Occasionally a fish of some sort would leap out of the water.

At Mr. Walters' suggestion, Van carried a little note book. In this he now made his first entries. In his pocket was his small field book of water birds, and over his shoulders the case containing the glass which he and his father had carried on their excursions. But the flying gulls did not come near enough

yet for him to identify them, there were some other sea birds which he did not think could be called gulls.

Before breakfast some of the scientific men came on deck, among them Dr. Hill, with a young man as tall as Van, who was an instructor in the university, Dr. Hill said. "Collier's line is biology, Arvin, perhaps, Walters told you about our great 'bird man' at the university. Well, here he is."

Mr. Collier wore an amused smile during this introduction, and Van was considerably attracted toward the young instructor. He was delighted to find from the further conversation that Dr. Hill and Mr. Collier expected to keep together and that he was supposed to accompany them. "I'll be after all sorts of things," said Dr. Hill, "and Collier will watch the birds and bugs, snakes and alligators, I suppose. You may assist in all."

"I'll not ask you to catch any alligators for me," suggested Mr. Collier.

At breakfast Van was introduced to Dr. Davis, a biologist from a different college and a great friend of Dr. Hill's, it was evident. Others of the "elect" came in. Van was accustomed to the society of men who were interested in things worth while, his father and his friends, but this association of college professors was something new. There were funny jokes, too, as well as much serious discussion. One man was joked about his fishing, and it seemed that there

were a few amateurs among these scientists as well as the professors. Van modestly kept still unless addressed.

Bobby Abernethy made his appearance before Van was ready to appreciate company, but he was pleasant to the little chap and let him look through his glasses. "I'll show you all my things, Bobby, if you will be careful. I'm going to need them, you know, and there will be no time to have them fixed. I have a good microscope that my father and I have used, and a brought a little radio set that I made myself."

"That won't do us much good out here, will it?" Bobby asked.

"No. I just brought it because I had it and did not want to leave it. My father was going to get us a good radio set and I was about to fix the aerial."

"Why didn't you, then?—because you were coming away?"

"No, Bobby. I came away because,—well, after the funeral."

"Oh! Haven't you got anybody?"

"Plenty of kind friends, Bobby."

"Let's go down and see your microscope."

Robert Abernethy was greatly entertained by the microscope, the radio set and other things which Van showed him, including a copy of the Bluejackets' Manual, at whose pictures he looked.

"I wanted to be a marine, when I was about your age, Bobby. My great-grandfather was a naval officer and I wanted to be one, too. My father had other plans for me, but he bought me a sailor rig, and we learned all about signals and different things even before I was a scout. I had great fun drilling. He was the Admiral and I was the Captain, or Commodore or whatever it was that I wanted to be at the time. Of course I had to be an officer."

"I wish that my father would do that. Couldn't you teach me some of those things? I'm going on nine years old."

"Perhaps I can, though since I have the manual I know that some of the things we did were just for fun. We might watch the crew."

"My father said that I was to stay away from the crew."

"He was doubtless right; but we can watch what is being done about the ship. Suppose we learn all about signals first."

The tall boy and the little boy went up on deck together, but Juliet called Bobby, and Van, who wanted to go over the ship by himself took advantage of the opportunity to stroll off.

Van soon found that Mr. Abernethy's advice to his small son was wise, on account of the character of the crew. The captain was a stern and dignified man, who seemed to have full control over his men.

But when Van heard orders of any sort given by those below the rank of captain, they were accompanied by so much swearing and rough action, except when the older passengers were around, that Van decided against any friendly association, such as he thought might be possible. A big boat of this sort was so thrilling to a boy of Van's age that he was sorry. He expected the life to make men rough, but not such villains as these men looked.

There were certainly some queer characters among the crew. One sinister looking foreigner wore gold earrings. Van called him the "pirate," in a letter that he began to write to Mark Hoyt. Several others might have qualified under the same name so far as looks were concerned; and when Van, wandering over the ship, made some innocent inquiry about the cargo and destination of the ship, he was roughly answered.

"See, here," said the man addressed, "passengers on this here ship want to mind their own business and not come snoopin' around. Mr. Abernethy he's chartered this boat for a cruise and that's all there is to it."

"Don't scare the feller, Bill," came a softer, smoother voice, and Van turned to see another of the "pirates" throwing an evil looking knife into a piece of wood, that he seemed to have nailed up as a target. "I'll tell you a secret. We're carryin' am-

munition for another revolution on one o' them South American states." And the man stopped throwing the knife long enough to wink at the first one.

"Haw, haw, haw!" laughed number one, called Bill. "Ammunition! Sure we're transportin' ammunition!"

Van smiled pleasantly, though it gave him a queer feeling to see the knife thrown so accurately, and pulled out with such a jerk from the soft wood. "I'm sorry that I bothered you," he said to "Bill." "This is the first time that I have been on a large ship and it is all so different from what I expected."

"This here boat was a freighter in the first place," volunteered the knife-throwing pirate, neatly pitching his knife into the middle of the board. "Then it was made over into what it is now an' as a passenger boat she is surely a botch. She ain't much, the *Black Skimmer* ain't." Van made no comments. He had already discovered that the *Black Skimmer* was different.

"She's got size, Blinky," said Bill, "an' speed. They ain't no enjines nowhere to beat the *Black Skimmer*. Carryin' ammunition, of course, she needs speed. Haw, haw!"

Blinky cast an evil glance in Van's direction and threw his knife again. Van walked away in a strolling gait, feeling that he should prefer to put on speed

himself as he turned his back upon that knife. Might the man be tempted to use that back as a target? No, he did not care to make intimates of Bill and Blinky, no matter what of adventure they might be able to relate!

After lunch the party of scientists decided that they wanted to tour the ship and Van accompanied Dr. Hill, by that professor's invitation. With the exception of Mr. Abernethy's family group, none of the passengers had arrived on board very much in advance of Van.

Van had already noted the painting of the ship in colors like the bird for which it was named. Red and white trimmings were about the bulwark, to brighten the general black appearance of the vessel.

There were many more cabins than passengers. This gave the scientists plenty of room for their personal equipment. Van was glad to have a large cabin to himself.

This time Van saw the engines, the dynamos, all the provisions for comfort and safety; innocent looking boxes and barrels in the holds; a launch, complete, for short trips from the ship, Dr. Hill explained to Van, and several boats beside the lifeboats. The captain stated that the vessel was prepared for a long voyage, if necessary, and was at the service of the scientists, through Mr. Abernethy.

The radio operator explained the entire radio out-

fit, and seeing that Van was particularly interested, he invited him to come back, an opportunity which Van did not intend to neglect. He had made his own receiving set, and there was a broadcasting station at home where he had occasionally assisted.

Dr. Hill and the other scientists asked intelligent questions of the captain, but Van noticed that in regard to the previous history of the vessel the captain had little to tell and gave the impression that he had been in command of the *Black Skimmer* only a short time. Van had received a different impression from what Mr. Abernethy had said. But the captain's ruddy face was untroubled and firm as usual and the scientists, at home in their own realm, gave the captain due respect in his.

Dr. Hill went to his cabin after seeing the ship, but Van, going to the top deck, fell in with Betty, who waited for him on the steps. "Isn't it glorious?" she asked. "Oh, will you let me look through your glasses?"

"Yes to both questions," laughed Van, unbuckling the case which was slung around his shoulder and taking out his binoculars. "I find that I am a good sailor so far, and while I haven't quite decided whether I'm going into the navy or going to be a scientist, the navy has it up to date."

"Really?" Betty queried, as they walked toward the bow of the vessel.

"I always wanted to go into the navy, but my father had other plans for me, as I told Bobby. Now, however, I'm sure that he would want me to do what seems best and what opens to me. It is different since he is gone. But if I should join the navy, I couldn't do other things that I like to do too; so there it is."

The stiff breeze blew Betty's hair about and whipped her dress and coat about her. Juliet and Dicky Gary joined them to look at the tossing waves and share the binocular, with Betty. "It's so rough," said Juliet, "that I asked the captain if we were going to have a storm. But he said that there has been one east of us and that we shall have fair weather today—so he thinks. I don't much enjoy the way the ship pitches."

"I understand that you are to be a sort of 'super' and help the old boys with their stuff," said Dicky Gary, leaning on the bulwarks by Van.

"Yes," replied Van, understanding from Dicky's tone that he was being put in his place socially.

"Too bad," said Dicky. "Another boy is coming on, I think, when we reach the Florida coast. You will have company in your misery."

"I'm glad to hear that there will be another chap with me, but I don't consider it misery at all. Think of the chance I have to learn about everything those 'old boys' find."

"Oh, you like that sort of thing, do you? Excuse me. I like yachting, but I wouldn't be on *this* old tub if it were not for Juliet. We're engaged." Dicky laughed, as if there were some joke about it.

"I see," returned Van, not knowing what he ought to say and not feeling like congratulating either of them. But Juliet and Dicky did not remain long. Van wanted to do other things, but he would not be impolite to Betty, whom he liked. She sat on a light bench and invited Van to sit beside her.

"I just wanted to tell you, Van," said she, "that Juliet and Dicky Gary are engaged, and that Dicky is here because he deceived Mr. Abernethy, my uncle, about it all. He doesn't know a word about how Dicky happened to be in New York and when Dicky asked him if he couldn't ride along with the scientists as far as Miami, uncle told him to come along. Juliet told me all this as a great joke, but I don't think it's honorable, do you?"

Van shook his head in the negative. "Doesn't sound very square to me," said he.

"Well, Juliet says that her chaperon is furious, but does not want to get up any trouble now. Juliet is almost eighteen now. She says that her mother doesn't like Dicky and sent her on this trip partly to forget him, or just to get her away. But when Juliet found that her mother had not told her father about Dicky's wanting to marrry her, she

and Dicky just thought up this little scheme. Juliet did not know that she was to have a chaperon, but of course my aunt would see to that." Betty sighed.

"Julie's been spoiled, I suppose. She is real nice to me, though, and it seems wonderful to have some people of my very own. I have been living with a friend of my mother's. She does not like Uncle Abernethy, so that is why I never had seen him before,—that and his forgetting about me, I guess. But you will not be interested in all this. I wish I were a boy and could go off in that wonderful launch down there, to see birds and things."

"Perhaps you wouldn't like some of the things, Miss Betty," smilingly Van suggested, as he rose to go.

"No, not alligators, or snakes,—but there are pretty things, too. Doesn't Dr. Hill do flowers and trees and all sorts of plants?"

"Yes, and we'll skim the *ni-ice* scum from the top of the pools in the swamps to see what vegetable life is there!"

"Oh, how horrid! But you like it, I suppose."

"They were talking about algae and fungi last night, and a little while ago Dr. Davis was telling Dr. Hill that of all the worms they would find, the planaria are the most interesting. They belong, it seems, to the *Tricladida*. I said it over, so I wouldn't forget it. Dr. Hill told Dr. Davis that he would be

interested in jelly-fishes and sea worms and sponges even if his own line was botany, and Dr. Davis told *him* that a scientist that didn't know anything outside of his own line was a pitiful fraud or something like that. That makes me think. I've got to look up what a sea lily is. It's an animal instead of a plant."

"There's an encyclopedia in the main cabin," said Betty, with a gesture that meant "Take it away. I'm on a vacation!"

CHAPTER VII.

ONE OF THE PIRATES.

For a few days Van considered almost every hour an adventure. Avoiding the "pirates" as much as possible, he tried to become acquainted with the *Black Skimmer,* as a boy would naturally want to do. The vessel puzzled him a little. Funny that they would have such an awful crew. Van considered the captain a "pretty good scout," grim as he looked and blunt as he was.

Mr. Abernethy mingled with the scientists or talked with the captain, or visited with his family, the chaperon usually withdrawing on such occasions. Van kept away, too, having more interesting things on hand, but Bobby sought him out when possible. Finding the radio operator friendly and lonely, Van spent a great deal of time with him, to his own profit.

At meals Van sat with Dr. Hill. Some of the scientific discussions went over Van's head, but he

thoroughly enjoyed the pertinent, humorous remarks of his own particular scientist and learned not a little by absorption. "Haven't you something for me to do, Dr. Hill?" he asked Dr. Hill on one occasion. "I ought to be making myself useful."

"There is nothing yet. I keep my own diary and take many notes. Those I shall have typed when I go back to the university. I am preparing a book, you know, and my secretary will assist me in the mechanical work of that. You are to have a share in the more important part on the field." The little man looked up at Van with a twinkle in his grey eyes.

"I'm in earnest. You may find something invaluable; so give me your brains as well as your brawn, when we get started. Meanwhile have a good time."

"I'm thinking that I shall have a good time all the way through."

"Then you are the kind of a lad I want. Tell me about yourself, Arvin. Walters gave me little idea of the circumstances under which you accepted the offer."

As they talked, they had been moving toward the cabin, a small one below the main cabin of the upper deck. Dr. Hill waved Van to a chair and sat down himself. With an occasional kindly remark, the

professor listened while Van told him the circumstances which made this offer particularly welcome. Dr. Hill drew Van out about his father till Van found himself telling more than he ever thought he could, about their life together and his father's ideas.

"I think now, Dr. Hill, that my father must have had some idea of his not living long, though perhaps it was only his good sense that made him tell me to meet life like a man if he should go first, as would be natural, he said. I can just see him now," said Van, rather happily and proudly than sadly. "He was lying on his cot in our tent last summer, with his hands and arms up, under his head, and he began to talk about the 'great adventure, under the great Creator' as if he liked to think about it. Then he said that wherever in this boundless universe he was he expected to be perfectly *real* and would be thinking about me and expecting me to be living a 'happy, useful life.' That's the kind of a father I had, Dr. Hill?"

"Live up to it, then, lad," cheerily said Dr. Hill, though he drew out a big handkerchief and took off his glasses to wipe them from some little mist or other. He had put them on, while Van was talking,

to look at a tiny snapshot of Mr. Arvin, which Van had taken from his pocket and handed to him.

"Are you getting over the first shock?"

"Yes sir,—though I keep thinking that I'm just on a trip away from him and that I'll find him when I go back. Then it comes over me once in a while that he will not be there,—ever. So I think that your work will help me a lot!"

"It will. Make careful notes, for it is the only way not to forget and to get the facts accurately. Then you will need all the credits you can get when you come to the university."

Van looked at the professor in surprise, though he was pleased at the suggestion.

Dr. Hill laughed, putting his glasses in their case and slipping them into his pocket. "Of course you are coming to the university. No fine lad like you ever slipped through my hands! If you haven't enough money, you can work your way. I think that I shall need some assistance in the laboratory. Yes, Collier and I work together, though you need not mention it to Davis. My line is botany."

Van's eyes twinkled too at this. "I hope that I can make good with you this summer," he said.

"You'd better,—I'm a great hand to have students do what I tell them. Here comes Collier. Tie up

to him, Arvin. There's a fine fellow. He's working out his doctor's degree now. Our folks haven't sense enough to make him an assistant professor or pay him a decent salary. We'll lose him and serve's us right." With this Dr. Hill rose and started to join a group who were consulting a big map, unfolded across a table.

Grinning, Van rose in courtesy as Dr. Hill left him. He hoped that Mr. Collier would join him and to his surprise he did so. "Come up on deck, Arvin. I want to tell you a little bit about what will be expected of you when we get to work. I see that you have your own binocular and have been a nature student already. I have some books in my cabin that I think you should read. Would you be interested?"

"Yes, sir. I have a little field book of birds, well, two of them, but that is all I brought. Where shall we stop first?"

"On the coast of Florida, at some of the keys, or islands. You many read up on butterflies and insects in general, if you like, as well as on birds. Dr. Hill will give you something on botany. Wait till he shows you the airplants, ferns and orchids growing on live oak trees down there."

"It is really true, then, that there are such things?"

"Oh, yes. I've never seen them, either, Van. I've not had much chance to travel till now. Blessings on Abernethy for this trip. I'm puzzled to know why he does it."

"Perhaps it's the reputation that a scientific expedition will give him."

"You may be right."

Van felt that his brain was expanding already and so he said to Betty, whom he happened to meet on the stairs, as he ran down to his cabin.

"It may be dangerous to have it expand too rapidly," commented Betty mischievously.

"I know it," answered Van. "I've had more than one balloon 'bust' in air!"

But in spite of this Van felt that he had a great spur to study. He would read evenings, as soon as he could begin on some book of Mr. Collier's. It was great of them to take an interest in him. That was a fine talk that he had had with the young scientist on deck. Say, what a lot of things there were to know! Mr. Collier had asked him if he had ever thought of taking astronomy, for the stars were just out above their heads.

Van hunted up a book of his own and began to look it through for certain southern birds of which Mr. Collier had spoken, the yellow-throated warbler

and the gray kingbird. "You will have to keep me from walking into a rattlesnake if I have my glass on some new bird." Mr. Collier had said. Van was not sure that he would notice a snake himself under such thrilling circumstances.

As he turned the pages, a new adventure was making ready for him, introduced by a low knock upon his door. Van jumped up and opened it, surprised to stand face to face with one of the "pirates."

Before Van could say "good evening," the man cast a look behind him and said, "Let me in, will you?"

Though not thirsting for the companionship of this furtive looking man, Van drew back and allowed him to enter. He closed the door, for the man looked friendly enough. "Is anything the matter?" he inquired.

"Matter enough," came the reply.

This was not Bill, who was pirate number one, nor Blinky, who was pirate number two, nor was he the pirate of the earrings. But Van had seen him with all three of the others, doing some of the rough work about the ship. When Van did not call them pirates, he dubbed them the road gang, in writing to Mark, in the letter that would be mailed later on.

A strong odor of tobacco, and Van thought some-

thing stronger, entered with the man, but he was not intoxicated. "Would y' do me a favor?" he asked.

"Why, yes, if I can," returned the surprised Van.

"Could y' keep a feller's propputy fer him an' give it back when he wants it?"

"Perhaps. It depends on what it is. I've plenty of baggage as it is. Then I'm leaving in the launch with Dr. Hill whenever he wants me."

"That's all right. I'll want it back before then. It'll not take much room. Y' look honest. I've got sump'n here that I got in Afriky. It's mine. I didn't steal it from nobody. It's a charm. Blinky and Crook's tryin' to git it off me. I'm tellin' 'em I aint got it. You stow it away. They'll never think of you."

Here Van interrupted. "I don't think that I want to keep anything so valuable that any one is after it. Why not take it to Mr. Abernethy and have him put it in his safe."

"A safe! Y' think Crook couldn't get into that? Then it'd be gone. Say, now," persuasively said the man, "I ain't got nobody. If they get me, it'll be yourn. See? I'm thinkin' that y' wouldn't kill me fur it."

"I should say not!" exclaimed the aghast Van. "But

I'll not have anything to do with it. No,—" and Van waved away a curious little box that the man was handing him.

"They'll never suspect y', I'm tellin' y' now. Hide, it, though, fur they might go through y'r baggage the way they do."

With that the man laid the box on Van's berth, stole to the door, opened it, looked back at Van to whisper "They're eatin' now," and slipped out softly.

Van shut the door and locked it. He was annoyed, yet he felt sorry for the man. What a life! The suggestion that baggage was examined was not pleasant. The man certainly had confidence. "Do I look honest?" thought Van, for fun glancing in the mirror where he saw two, clear blue eyes, some thick, dark brown hair, a good nose, a pleasant mouth, and a firm, but not prominent chin,—but another rap!

The plot thickened. Should he unlock the door? Was this a pirate coming to claim the—whatever it was. Van threw his handkerchief around the little box, that was none too clean, and tossed it inside of his grip, which happened to be open. "Who's there?" he called, beginning to take off his collar. Undressing would be an excuse for the locked door, though it was early.

"Me, Commodore."

"Ho-Ho, the Admiral! Come in, Admiral Bobby."

"Say, that is a nice game," said Bobby Abernethy, grinning widely as Van admitted him. "Were you going to bed?"

"It is rather early, isn't it?" asked Van buttoning on his collar again. "I thought that I'd better inquire who was there."

"That was a good idea. If the Princess happened to come around, you would have wanted your collar on."

"Princesses are not very likely to call on me, Bobby, but by the way, old man, if I were you I'd keep my doors locked all the time."

"That's what Dad said tonight."

"All right, sir; but why aren't you in bed yourself?"

"Because there isn't anybody to make me go. Dad's talking with the captain; Mrs. Jerome's got the sick headache; Juliet's with Dick, and Betty isn't used to taking care of me."

"I see. Well, Bobby, I wouldn't stay up much longer if I were you. You can come around to see me as early as you like to-morrow. How would it do for the Commodore to come around and take off the Admiral's shoes?"

"All right. You aren't anybody's valet, are you?"

"Not yet," laughed Van. "What has become of yours?"

"Dad's won't look after me. He says if he has to he will leave."

"Right in the middle of the ocean?"

"This isn't the middle of the ocean."

"That was a figure of speech, Robert. It will be better for you to look after yourself anyhow. Look here."

Van turned to a certain page in the Bluejackets' Manual and pointed out a line to the child. Then he held out his wrist to show Bobby the time, for Van had provided himself with a good wrist watch which would not be easily lost on expeditions.

"What does the book say, Admiral?

"Nine o'clock, Tattoo. Pipe down. Silence. Muster and set first anchor watch."

"And the next line?"

"Nine-five,—Taps."

"Shall we pipe down, then?"

"All right. Come on, Commodore."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS BOX.

VAN felt sorry for Bobby. It was a lonely performance for the child, getting to bed alone, and Van wondered that his father would let him do it. Perhaps he had been left to a nurse or servants all his life and Mr. Abernethy did not think of it now. The child had a cabin to himself, too, next to his father's. This Bobby opened, as he saw light through the cracks about the door. "Hello. Going to bed now, Bibble."

"All right sir. I'll look in presently and tell your father."

"That's Dad's valet, Van," and Bobby opened his own door. "Enter, Commodore!"

"Thank you, Admiral. Now for the shoes."

In spite of having been spoiled in some respects and occasionally showing a little babyishness, Bobby was in the main a manly child for his age. He was full of questions, relating chiefly to school and its

games. "Why, yes, Bobby, I should think it a real good thing for you to practice kicking a football; and you might get your father to fix you up a kind of basket, the proper height for you, for basketball practice."

It was some little distance back to Van's own stateroom, and not all of the way was well lighted, but Van had picked up his flashlight when he started out with Bobby. Turning into the narrow corridor toward his own cabin, he saw a dark figure standing outside his door. A little startled, he drew back a step. "Hello," said he, turning the flashlight full upon the man, "what do you want here?"

The man's right hand was behind him, and Van was sure that he had seen a knife in it when he first turned the light in his direction. The man had been in the attitude of listening as well.

"None o' yer business," promptly snarled the man, who was evidently surprised.

"Why, yes it is my business," said Van, but not unpleasantly, "That is my door there where you are standing."

"Who is in there?" asked the man.

"No one. I left the light on and locked it."

"Some one wuz with ye."

"Yes, before I left."

"What did he give ye?" said the man edging nearer.

"I'll not talk to you unless you put up that knife," said Van.

The man brought his hand around empty. "Ain't got no knife."

"Excuse me. I thought that I saw one. You wanted to know who was there before I left my cabin?"

"Yes, and what he gave ye."

"I have just come from taking Bobby Abernethy back to his cabin and it was Bobby who was with me, and he gave me nothing. Please explain. If anybody did give me anything what would it be? What are you after? What were you going to do at my door? I think that I'd better speak to some one about this." Van noticed that a light shone from under Dr. Hill's door, down the other corridor, at whose corner he was standing.

"Now, see here," said the man, advancing another step, and changing his tone to a smooth tone that Van remembered. It was Pirate Number Two, he of the knife-throwing propensities. Well, football had taught him to be a good dodger on occasion!

"There ain't no call to git excited. A friend o' mine has something that belongs to me. He got mad

and said he wuz goin' to give it to the first person he seen. Bill said that he come down this way, so I come here and wuz goin' to take it away from him when he come out. See?"

"You know, don't you, that we can't have any rows in this part of the ship? If I see any more lurking around these passages I'll have to report you men to the captain and Mr. Abernethy."

"You'd better not tell," threatened the man, scowling.

"If you keep your quarrels to yourselves and keep away from the passengers' staterooms, I'll have no reason to tell."

Van stepped aside, within the corridor, till the man had gone. Should he go speak to Dr. Hill about this? No, he could handle the matter. Unlocking his own door, Van stepped inside, locked it again and sat on the edge of his berth to think over the occurrances of the evening. He wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, for he had been tense while he talked to the man and felt a sense of danger. Discipline must be lax on the ship that these things could happen. He had told no real untruth, he thought, and felt justified in concealing the fact that "Pirate Number Three" had visited him. It looked like a serious situation for some one. Perhaps he

could prevent more trouble. Should he tell the captain, or Mr. Abernethy?

It would be a pretty state of things if he must watch when he left his cabin or went about the ship. He was in his berth before he remembered that he had not hidden the little box. Well, let them take it if they could get in. They would have to force a strong bolt.

Van was not a nervous lad and was inclined to regard this as an interesting adventure. With his revolver within reach, however, he felt safer and soon slept.

In the morning he sleepily stretched his long body and tried to remember what in particular had been on his mind the night before,—something special. Oh, yes. That box. He determined to give it back at the first opportunity. In his absence with Bobby Abernethy, the other man had been listening at his door, thinking that there was some one there because of the light, and waiting for the owner of the box. But who did own it? And should he report this to Dr. Hill, or Mr. Abernethy, or the captain? Perhaps the man was wrong about the "pirates." Surely they would not dare go through the passengers' baggage.

Well, he certainly would not trouble good Dr. Hill with this. It was his business to protect Dr. Hill. It was Mr. Abernethy's business to *know* about

the ship, but perhaps he would give him a hint at some opportunity. The captain,—well, he would wait. Had Van been wise he would have reported the incident at once, but his hesitation was, perhaps, not unnatural. They might think that he was afraid, too.

Van whistled as he dressed, carefully as usual, for was he not associating with the "*elite?*" But he longed to get into camping togs. Pretty soon he would not be with the pirates. Not knowing where he could hide the dingy, queer little box, he wrapped it in some tinfoil from a chocolate bar, tucked it in his vest pocket and went out to breakfast, locking his door behind him as usual. He had nothing of great value. Could they want his arms? That question caused him a little uneasiness. As he ate his breakfast, this time before any of the older men were at table with him, he pondered the subject. Fortunately, the men of the crew were kept quite busily at work. At night he would be careful to keep the door bolted when he was in the room. He had been sitting to read without thinking of it. No pirate was going to walk in upon him now.

The greatest difficulty would be in giving back the box. That done, the incident would be closed, so far as he was concerned. But he must do it in such a way as not to bring suspicion upon the man who owned the "charm" from "Africky." It did

not occur to Van to open the box and examine its contents. It was not his. Whatever the charm might be, it must be valuable.

He was not very familiar with the face of the man who had visited him, but he would know him, he felt sure; and he had noticed a curious ring of twisted silver upon the large, rough hand which held out the box to him and finally laid it down for him to keep or lose.

But Van saw nothing of the man that day except at a distance and with "Blinky" and Bill. Could he be keeping away from him on purpose? Had he convinced these men he did not have it? Was suspicion diverted? There were other things to interest Van, however and he almost forgot the little "charm" he carried, in several hours with the radio operator and a long talk with Mr. Collier about the books and their subjects. At Mr. Collier's suggestion, he took several to his own cabin to look over or to read if they were not too technical. The descriptions and pictures of the shells and their living inhabitants and of other treasures of the beaches interested him so much that he read in that book rather than in the one on birds. He knew less about shells anyhow.

Another day had gone and still he had the box. Having occasion to visit Dr. Hill's cabin after dark, and wanting, also, to be out on deck for a while before going to his berth, he slipped his revolver into

his pocket. But there was nothing to give him any alarm. Again the sea breezes and the rocking of the *Black Skimmer* brought sleep to the active lad.

They were in Southern waters now. Though the *Black Skimmer* had been praised by the "pirate crew" as being a speedy boat, she had not hurried southward. But it was much warmer. Though the breezes were cool, the sun was very hot. It must be still summer in Florida.

Van dressed determining that he would see the owner of the box, "with no nonsense about it!" It was glorious on deck that early morning and almost the first one that he saw was the man he wanted.

Mr. Collier was standing with his glass leveled at the western horizon, where Van detected a shadowy outline. They must be approaching the coast. Looking about, Van saw that no other member of the crew was in sight. He took quick steps toward the man, who was busy with some ropes.

Thinking it best to make sure that no one would witness a conversation, however brief, he strolled past him. The man gave him a stony glance, but made no sign of recognition. Van circled all around and returned, taking his own glass from its case and holding the box almost concealed in his hand.

He stopped now. "Here,—take it quickly—I will not keep it any longer. Pretend I'm asking you about that shore over there!"

"Ja wanta git murdered, and me, too?" replied the sailor with an angry expression, though he stepped closer to Van and pointed toward the coast. "They're always spying on me," he added, "Crook and Blinky. Keep it and don't be seen passing anything to me. I'll come to git it tonight, mebbe."

Van nodded. "Be sure that you do. If you don't, I'll have to tell Mr. Abernethy or the captain. A man was watching at my door last night. I think that he was waiting for you with a knife. Here take my glass and look at the shore while I tell you about it."

It took only a moment for Van to relate the incident of the night before. Then he left that part of the deck, after receiving back his binocular from the disturbed sailor, and sauntering along near the bulwarks he focused the lenses upon the distant shore line. As he looked, whose voice should he hear behind him but that of Blinky? Blinky had a pail of water and a swab, only an excuse, Van thought, as he looked around in surprise.

Blinky was keeping an eye out for any superior, like captain or mate, but he had said, "Thick with Crusty, ain't you?"

Van knew that the man would not have dared to say that to an adult passenger, but he soberly looked at Blinky and replied. "Are you trying to get into trouble? Is this the man you were talking about?"

"Yes, sir," mockingly replied the bold Blinky. "Did he slip you his dimons or did you slip them to him?"

"Neither," replied Van. "See, here. I don't have to stand this annoyance. Suppose you come with me to the Captain. If one of the crew has stolen anything of yours, as you said last night, why not take your complaint to him?"

"The captain he ain't no school-ma'am, he ain't. *You* go an' *tell* him on me, bub."

"Perhaps I will," replied Van, turning his back on Blinky and raising his glass again. He did not see the evil leer with which Blinky left in his vicinity.

So the box contained "dimons," or Blinky thought that it did. Van had no idea that the important article belonged to Blinky. Of the two, "Crusty" was the better man, Van thought, though there might be little choice among these piratical fellows. Crusty must have been named for his delightful disposition.

Mr. Collier joined Van in a few moments. Then came breakfast, Dr. Hill, and Van's presence in a funny conference between Dr. Hill and Dr. Davis about Mr. Collier.

"Yes," said Dr. Davis, "our school is poor. There is little in natural science that I have not had to teach at one time or another. But we are to have a new man and they have given me the task or

pleasure of picking him out. I've my eye on your man Collier. What do you think of him?"

"You can't have him," promptly replied Dr. Hill, "unless you make him assistant or full professor. He'll not leave us for less. I'm trying to keep him at the university, but I wouldn't stand in the way of his advancement. Can you afford to pay a respectable salary?"

"I hope so. How soon does he get his doctor's degree?"

"As soon as I give it to him. This is part of his work. It may be original research with a vengeance, too, when we get into the swamps." Dr. Hill chuckled. "His special line is biology, but as head of the science department, I direct all of his work. Van, you ought to get some kind of a degree for your work with me, don't you think so?"

Van grinned. "Didn't you suggest some credit for good notes?" he inquired.

"It's a bargain. We'll see which keeps the best notes, you or I."

"I guess there's not much doubt but what you will," laughed Van. Dr. Hill was certainly a great joker.

Bobby Abernethy came next in demands upon Van's time, but he took him to the radio headquarters, where they looked over some reports that the operator had to show Van. But it was a little

too technical for Bobby, all of the conversation, and the big words that they read. Yet the child was bright about the practical workings of the radio and greatly interested in the new, compact equipment, such as aviators carry, which Mr. Abernethy had purchased before leaving New York, apparently for the launch.

He followed Van to his cabin, where he remained a short time. Van thought best to warn him, for Bobby must not wander around the vessel alone at night. "Bobby," said he, "don't come to my cabin alone in the evening after this, unless you have grown-up company. I found one of the crew hanging around here last night, one of the 'pirates,' as I call those ill-looking men."

"Oh, do you do that, too? So does Betty. All right. But you could come and get me sometimes."

"So I could," gravely replied Van.

It was late in the afternoon when Van was by himself in his cabin, wondering what to do with that miserable little box. It loomed as large as a trunk when he thought of hiding places. But he ought to keep it at least till evening, and he did not feel that it was safe to have it in his pocket. Since Blinky had seen the exchange of words that morning between him and Crusty, he might be more suspicious than ever, though Van hoped that he had succeeded

in convincing him of there having been no exchange of property.

They were now near Florida, though not yet making directly for a harbor there. Shortly Van would be on the launch with some of the scientists,—he was eager at the very thought. He bolted his door and took the box from his pocket, taking off the tinfoil to examine it. For the first time, it occurred to Van that it might be empty. Suppose the man was trying to fasten some theft upon him; or suppose that there had been a theft beforehand and Crusty would hold him responsible! Never again! He ought not to have been such an "easy mark." But these fancies were not probable. The box was rather heavy for such a tiny thing, scarcely an inch and a half by two inches, though the wood itself might be what gave it its weight. Should he open it? Yes, he would, now. He had a right to see what he was, perhaps taking some risk for, and if it were empty, he should know it.

So deciding, Van put his finger upon the lid to open it. As it stuck, Van ran his knife around the edge to loosen it. A soiled bit of cloth had tied it. This Van had removed when he first wrapped it in the tinfoil, though he realized now that he had taken a risk in doing so if there were loose stones in the box.

The firm, curiously carved lid came off, disclosing

a lump of soiled cotton. Carefully Van opened this and raised his eyebrows with a soft whistle, at what he saw. Well! No wonder that Crusty wanted some one to look after these. Not *much* he would be the one! If Crusty did not appear, he would take the box to Mr. Abernethy before he slept this night!

Flashing in a bit of sunlight which came through Van's porthole, there lay upon the cotton two large diamonds and a beautiful red stone which Van supposed was a ruby. All were well cut and beautiful. Van knew that the size was unusual.

Van knew nothing about precious stones, but he fancied that such large and perfect stones must be worth an immense sum. No wonder that thieves wanted them. Two men already claimed ownership. Who really owned them was decidedly doubtful.

Where should he find a temporary hiding place? There was no place in the cabin which would not be searched. Finally Van decided to tuck the box in his little medicine case, which he and his father had been accustomed to take with them, and which Cousin Emily had filled with great care for this expedition. At Van's protest against some of her suggestions, she insisted that all her remedies should go. Besides bandages and first-aid equipment there was quite a variety, including a supply of cough drops arranged in a small box larger than their customary container. Van grinned when he opened

this and saw what it contained. The dampness had made the cough drops sticky and the whole top layer was beginning to stick together. "Good work," said Van to himself. "I'll put his box at the bottom."

Carefully he lifted out the sticky drops, putting one in his mouth. Tying up Crusty's box again and wrapping it with paper, he put it in the bottom of the other box and wedged it in with sticky cough drops. Several layers of drops went above this and the top layer was the one from which he had taken several to eat. The rubber hand was replaced on the box of drops. In its former place it looked very innocent.

Relieved in mind, and thinking that he had done his best for the rough man who trusted him, after all, Van locked his door and bounded up the stairs to the deck and his friends. He dismissed the matter from his mind in the general interest taken by every one now that they were so near their first stopping place. But after dinner, which was late, Mr. Abernethy happened to see Van and invited him into the main cabin.

"Where have you been keeping yourself, Arvin, these evenings?" Mr. Abernethy asked. "Come on in and join the folks. I'm sure that Betty will entertain you."

"I've been reading up a little, Mr. Abernethy.

There hasn't been much time to get ready, you know."

Van would have preferred to stay out on deck, but he meekly followed Mr. Abernethy. The victrola was in full operation and Juliet was dancing with Dicky. None of the professors were there, as that was not their line and they could not talk in the midst of modern music. But Betty was sitting by a table with a book and smiled brightly as Van came in. He crossed the room and drew up a chair by her, hoping that she would start the conversation.

The book gave them the theme, for as Van sat down, Betty held it up before him. "With all the wisdom there is around here, I decided that I would not be left in the lurch altogether. See what I found in the bookcase."

Van took the book and looked at it with interest. It was an old textbook on "Natural History" and full of pictures. "It's adapted to my infant mind, Van," laughed Betty, "and it really gives an awfully good classification. Do you suppose that we'll see any of these queer birds and animals?"

"Depends upon where we go, Betty, doesn't it? Don't you hope that they decide to go to South America?"

"I guess so, but every place is new to me, and I'd like to stay long enough to see it well. I don't suppose that *we'll* be taken on to South America if

you do go there. Juliet and I will stay in Miami with my aunt. What have you been doing? You haven't been with us a single evening."

"I've been reading up and having adventures."

"With the 'pirates?' Bobby said that you warned him not to run around after dark."

"I've been meaning to warn you, too. Be sure to lock your door well at night and keep away from this crew."

"Uncle told me that. But what adventures have you had?"

Nothing had been farther from Van's mind than telling Betty about the dangerous treasure assigned to his keeping, but it occurred to him that it would not be a bad idea for some one to know. "I'm all set for burglars now," he began. "If you think best, you can tell your uncle about it. I have hesitated to worry him. Come out on deck, Betty. You are going to be be so thrilled over this that your expression will bring the whole crowd over!"

Betty picked up a wrap and went with Van to a seat on deck where Van could not be overheard as he told her of Crusty's jewels and the circumstances of their being put in his hands. "They may be glass, Betty, but they don't look like it. I've got to go down to my cabin pretty soon, for Crusty is supposed to call for the box tonight."

"Well, do make sure that it is Crusty before you

open your door. You don't suppose that any one would dare to attack you, do you?"

"Oh, I scarcely think so, Betty. They might look through my things."

"Well, if Crusty doesn't come for it, I'd certainly let Uncle put it in the big safe tomorrow."

CHAPTER IX.

ANOTHER ADVENTURE.

After taking Betty back to her friends, Van went to his cabin and spent the evening in reading and in looking over his camp equipment. Dr. Hill had just told him that they expected to visit the new nesting place of the pelicans, since they had deserted Pelican Island. The scientists were in the throes of deciding what to do first; and by this time Van had discovered that few of them had the definite objective of Dr. Hill and Dr. Davis.

Van had not carried his revolver, since he had hidden the jewel box, but he now saw that it was in good condition. He made up his kit and selected what he expected to tuck away in the launch for use upon the shorter trips. He also packed his small bag. His money he had given to Mr. Abernethy to be put in the safe, and he had told Betty that evening that perhaps it would be well to warn Mr. Abernethy about a man in the crew who could open safes. He was rather glad, however, that he had told her not

to put too much stress upon what "may have been largely bluff." Boy-like, Van had a horror of seeming to be a "sissy" or easily frightened.

No Crusty appeared. At eleven Van stretched out in his berth and fell asleep, waking somewhat later to find that the ship had anchored. He heard a boat leave the ship. That was interesting. He wondered how near land they were. At last he became so wide awake that he could not go to sleep again for some time. He tossed about in a tumbled berth till he heard the sound of oars again. The ship moved on again and Van grew drowsy. He was almost asleep when he heard a loud cry, so distinct that he thought it came from some place near his cabin. He thought of Dr. Hill and jumped from his berth at once. Unlocking his door he looked out. He ran around the corner and down the corridor a few steps to Dr. Hill's door, behind which a mild snore assured him that his professor was sleeping.

Back again to his open cabin Van went, remembering now the treasure that it guarded. But his flashlight revealed no intruder. There were some indistinguishable movements somewhere above, he decided. He went to his open porthole and listened, for he seemed to hear more clearly in his cabin than elsewhere.

Then he heard an exclamation, a groan, a splash. Some one was overboard. Van lost no time. He threw on enough clothing to go to the deck and ascended the nearest stairs. To the first man of the watch on duty whom he saw, Van briefly stated what he had overheard. His news was received with unconcern and he was told that he had probably had a nightmare. But Van saw the sailor nudge another who came up to listen. "Somebody was drunk," said the second man. "We took liquor from one man tonight."

A reason for the boat's going out and coming back flashed through Van's mind; but seeing Captain Pitt standing fully dressed on deck, he went up to him and repeated what he had just told the sailor.

The big captain, slowly turning, eyed Van critically. "What wakened you?" he asked. But Van had no notion of telling how long he had been awake.

"There was that loud, frightened cry, you see, Captain Pitt. It seemed so near that I ran around to see if anything were wrong with Dr. Hill."

"You are not accustomed to the occasional brawls of our seamen," said the captain. "A man was intoxicated tonight. But I will send some one to investigate. You can go back to your cabin."

"Yes, sir." Feeling decidedly snubbed, but sure

that something very wrong had been on foot, Van went back, away from the stirring breeze and view of the black, surging water, to the seclusion of his cabin. There was no moon now. All was dark from his porthole. Though Van was confident that there had been serious trouble, he was no longer tense, since he had passed the knowledge along to the captain. Sleep overcame him at once.

He almost missed breakfast the next morning, but he enjoyed his hot cakes and the other good things which the *Black Skimmer* boasted. To his delight he heard that the little launch was to go overboard that morning. "It will take mail ashore, Arvin," Dr. Hill informed him. "That could just as well go by one of the rowboats, to be sure, but the launch is to be launched in any event, so why not now?"

"Good!" exclaimed Van, wishing that he dared suggest his own going on this first trip. He determined to see how they would get the boat over into the ocean, though he would be obliged to watch at a distance he well knew. Perhaps one object of this first trip was to test the launch. He did not know. Probably it was sea-worthy or it would not have been taken at all.

Birds were growing very interesting. Van, pacing the ship in his impatience, joined Mr. Collier and

Betty who were watching some birds that flew near the ship. The *Black Skimmer* was now anchored in deep water off the coast. "Here come the old witches on their broomsticks," said Betty as Van came up.

Van followed Betty's gesture and watched a flock of the awkward brown pelicans come sweeping out of the sky, flapping their large wings, close, but never interfering with each other, and flying along almost in the water, according to Betty, so near they were to the waves.

Conveniently for comparison, a big Caspian tern and a royal tern flew upon a fishing trip not far from them. The little party of three watched them dive, while Mr. Collier called attention to the fact that the Caspian tern was the larger. "It is hard to tell, sometimes, with birds so similar, unless one finds them together," said he.

Betty looked through Van's glass. She found it hard to tell the difference between twenty-one inches and nineteen inches in length. There were the red bills, the black on the heads, the white bodies shining in the sun, and Betty amused her companions by asserting that she would remember the difference in expression. "That Caspian tern wears the longest grin, I'm sure," she declared.

Every one was interested in the launching process

which took place later than scheduled. Van had his letters to Mrs. Wayne, Mark Hoyt and Mr. Walters ready to send. Against his inclinations he wrote a brief but courteous note to Mr. Swift, as he knew he ought to do. He had not proved to be a villain yet, and he was his guardian, after all. His own father had chosen him.

With all the excitement about the launch, there was no good opportunity to talk about his experience of the night. Van did not see Crusty among the men. Probably he had not found an opportunity to slip around to Van's cabin. The possibility of his having been a victim occurred to Van, but he scarcely thought that Crusty would be murdered for the jewels if he did not have them. They would be sure of them first, he thought.

He would give Crusty one more night. Mr. Abernethy and the captain were both too busy to be bothered. At last the launch went flying through the waves toward land. It seemed larger once in the water. Indeed, it had taken up a great deal of room on the big *Black Skimmer*. Van wished that he could have arranged for mail to be held for him at this point, but he would receive none until at Miami, for that had been the only place mentioned in the letter to Mr. Walters.

Everybody was celebrating at dinner over letters. Papers were passed to Van and he was invited to the gathering in the main cabin by Mr. Abernethy. As the scientists gathered there, too, and Van wanted to be in touch with all their plans, he went and atached himself to their group, in response to a beckoning hand, that of Dr. Hill. It was late when he excused himself to Dr. Hill, and went to his cabin. They had ceased discussing plans and places and were arguing along the line of scientific theories, entirely above his head part of the time. Some of it he thought silly, and he had a notion that Dr. Hill thought so, too.

As Van reached his cabin, he noticed that his door was not locked, having tried his key automatically first. Thinking how careless he had been to leave his door without locking it, he entered and started to turn on the light, only to find himself seized and held!

Not for long was he held however. He wrenched himself loose, struck out with fists and feet and felled someone to the floor. In a moment he had turned on the light, noticing that the back of his hand was cut and feeling himself seized again. But the hand was taken from his arm and Van whirled to see two men, one leaning forward with an ugly

expression on his face, and a leveled pistol in his hand, the other picking himself up from the floor with muttered words dreadful to hear. The knife, Van was glad to see, had dropped from his hand and could not be seen. It was Blinky, of course, who was rising from the floor. His furious expression changed a little, as he noticed that the door was open.

Scrambling up, he passed behind the other man and closed the door. "May as well leave the light on," he growled. "Now young feller, hand over them dimuns!" he ordered.

"I have none about me," quietly said Van, his eyes on the man who held the pistol. Strange to say, he was only angry, though he knew that they could put an end to him if they would. It was like a crisis in the game at home. He stood at bay, as it were, his fists clenched. Seeing every detail, he noticed that the twisted silver ring which Crusty had worn was now on the hand that held the pistol. What did that mean?

"Keep quiet, then, while we search yuh," this new pirate said. "We ain't found what we want in yer cabin and it wasn't on the feller that stole it."

They had searched Crusty, then; perhaps worse had happened. Van saw that his cabin was thoroughly

upset, the bedding on the floor, the contents of his trunk trailing. Knowing how useless it would be to resist further, Van permitted the sullen Blinky to search him, even opening his mouth upon request, where all that they saw was a very even row of good teeth. Van was glad that he had not kept his money in his belt. Only a small amount was in his pockets and that they took.

"Now, wot have you got hid away here? And where is it? Or have you give it to some one to keep for yeh?"

"In the first place," began Van, "you haven't told me what you are after. In the second place, everything that I know of in this cabin that is of any value to me or any one is on the floor and it looks to me if you had made a pretty thorough search! Help yourselves! If there is anything hidden away in the walls, or bed, anywhere about the cabin in any cubby-hole, I don't know about it."

Van had seen that the contents of the medicine case were scattered, the box of cough drops open and tablets of various sorts scattered over the floor. The men in their hurry had not been as thorough as he would have been in a search.

"Don't get smart," sneered Blinky. He kicked about in the mess of articles upon the floor. "We

might go through 'em agin, Crook," he said. "I didn't empty out all the bottles in that case an' there's cough drops!" Blinky laughed. "He's afraid he might ketch cold!"

Van thought that now the discovery would be made, but he managed to grin, while Blinky kicked quite a dent in the box, causing the sticky top layer to lift itself out of the box entirely and disclose similarly upheaved cough drops below. But Van saw this only partially, not looking directly. Perhaps his very lack of interest in the gems themselves deceived the men. He kept most of his attention upon the pistol in the hands of "Crook." "You can have anything you want, if you will only leave me my revolver," he said. I'm needing that in the swamps pretty soon."

Blinky, who was wearing Van's belt and revolver patted it and leered at Van. "Little boys don't need arms," he said. "Come on Crook. We're wastin' time. I guess the kid didn't have it at all."

Alert, Van watched. What would they they do now? He scarcely dared make a dash for the door in the face of that pistol. Would others be molested?

Blinky removed Van's key from the door, peering out watchfully. He closed the door and drew a rope from his pocket.

"I'll just tie you up and gag you for a while," said he. "Crook has a little job to do."

"Yes," growled Crook, "and I've got to get at it. Cut out the tyin', Blinky. You lock him in and watch around till I get through. Hurry up. Abernethy and them professors will be all over the ship pretty soon. I don't want to have to hold up Abernethy. If you cheep fer a while, young feller, it will be all up with you!"

With that threat, Crook backed to the door, Blinky stepping outside first and clapping the door shut as soon as Crook had entered the hall. The key turned. Van was locked in, with a man outside to attack him even if he unlocked the door. That Van felt that he could do, with a key on his key-ring which he had tried before, when the cabin key proper was mislaid.

What was this job of Crook's? The safe, of course! They were going to leave the ship very likely. How Van wished that he had asked the captain whether he had found out what happened last night. But there had been no stir about anything among the men. He had asked the same sailor who was on the watch if he knew, only to hear the same comment on the intoxicated sailor.

Van was glad that he was neither tied nor gagged.

That must be a terrible and dangerous experience. He was at least free within the room. What could he do? Stupid! He had not thought to bolt the door. Quickly he bolted it and just in time, for the key turned in the lock and the door was tried. He heard Blinky's evil exclamation.

"Say,—say, in there, open the door, will you?"

Van did not reply. Let them think that he was overcome with the strain!

"Want me to send a bullet through the door?"

Van, out of range, felt like saying, "Suit yourself," but that would be mere bravado.

"Come now," said the hateful voice, "We didn't hurt you any. I left my knife in yer cabin. Hand it out, won't ye? I'll give ye back yer belt and pistol if you'll hand me my knife."

Gladly would Van have made the exchange. But as for trusting this pirate to do it,—that was another matter. To get in the door must be battered down, and that would make too much noise to suit Blinky. He noticed that his hand was bleeding from the cut, not much more than a scratch, to be sure, but annoying, though he had scarcely felt the sting of it while under the tension of the thieves' presence. He washed his hands and wrapped his handkerchief around the hurt one, while he began to gather up the contents

of his medicine case. He found what he wanted, though several bottles of medicine were broken, their contents soaking into his clothing, such of it as lay on the floor.

He was too much excited, and worried over what might happen to the rest of the passengers, to care about the confusion or his clothing. He looked under his berth where he thought Binky's knife might be. He had heard its clattering fall. There it was, a sharp, evil looking thing, curved, pointed, with an odd, carved handle. It would be a fine souvenir,—provided the incident turned out well!

His hand treated and bound up, Van sat on the edge of his berth to think what he should do. He could not stay there like a mouse in a trap and let things happen. He was too big to get through that little porthole. Perhaps he could handle Blinky alone, if Crook was not there. He thought of the position of his cabin, remembering that the partition seemed to be only of a light board between his cabin and the next one to it. Perhaps with his newly acquired knife he could get into the next cabin, where a large part of Dr. Hill's and Dr. Davis's equipment was located.

Van's cabin was an outside cabin, but stood at a corner, its door facing a series of small closets, for

which a short hallway led from a longer corridor, at right angles, down the length of Van's cabin to the side of the ship, where there was a larger porthole than that in Van's cabin. The long corridor led on to cabins occupied by Dr. Hill, Dr. Davis, and one of the younger scientists known to the Abernethys as "Neal Evans." A stairway came down from the upper deck not far from Van's cabin, where the corridor was joined by another.

There was a chance that the cabin next to his might not be locked, a slim chance, indeed, for Dr. Hill's treasures were to him priceless. Ages were going by, it seemed to Van, though he had probably been in the room alone only about five minutes. It would take too long to get out in any other way but the door. He had heard Blinky take the key out of his door, for Blinky probably wanted to be able to leave suddenly and return if any one came along. Van decided to risk an encounter with Blinky, armed with Blinky's own knife, but to make a dash for the stairs first.

He rattled the door a little, to find where his guard was located. A growling voice protested. Blinky had one of those closets open! It looked hopeless, with Blinky in concealment so near. But Van's mind was made up. Softly he inserted the other key and

gently turned it, leaving it in the keyhole, to prevent its being locked from the outside again. He would slip the bolt, throw open the door and run,—but not just yet.

Then he heard voices,—Dr. Hill's among them, the conference was breaking up. He could not let Dr. Hill come down into danger! Again Van was in the mood of the field. It was an end run with more dangerous interference than usual. But Van did not think of that. Grimly he set his teeth together, slid the bolt, threw wide open the door and like a tall shadow ran, knife in hand, from the room. He had counted a little on Blinky's not wanting to fire the revolver and upon surprising him.

So it happened. He ran right into Blinky, who happened to have left his retreat to reconnoiter at the corner. As these were not football tactics, Van knocked Blinky down with his left hand and made the stairway. Never a boy reached the first landing more quickly than Van Arvin on this occasion. And there he saw Dr. Hill and Dr. Davis a few steps above him, on the turn to the right.

With amazement they looked at the disheveled boy with his bound hand and the shining knife.

"Do not come any farther, *please,* Doctor Hill. There is trouble."

"Is it 'stand and deliver,' Arvin?" facetiously asked Dr. Hill, raising his hands.

"You don't understand, sir." Van turned, to look back apprehensively a moment. "But I guess the man would not face so many. I'll go back."

"Wait!" called Dr. Davis, with authority. "What is all this, Arvin? Have you been in danger? Come on. The captain is above. We must investigate this."

"Yes, Doctor Davis," said Van, recovering himself. "One fellow was going to try the safe, I think. Please have some one look after that. They locked me in my cabin."

For a while there was hasty activity. Fortunately Crook had not found opportunity to open the safe, if that had been the "job." Van still thought that it was, for search was immediately made of the entire vessel. No damage was reported. Neither Blinky nor Crook could be found. Under the searchlight some smaller craft could be seen between the *Black Skimmer* and the shore, but Captain Pitt did not see fit to send out a boat to find the men. "If they want to risk the sharks by swimming," he said, "let them. After all, they have only held up and robbed a boy."

"I should say that burglary, with weapons, is a considerable crime, Captain Pitt," said Dr. Hill in

his matter-of-fact voice. "I hope, indeed, that they are no longer upon the ship. I saw the condition of Arvin's cabin, Captain Pitt, and I would suggest that he be given other quarters for the night."

"That is not necessary, Dr. Hill," said Van. "I'll just go back, pick up some of my things, and make up my berth again. I'll not get caught that way again. I'll go armed on this ship after this. How about Crusty, Captain Pitt?"

A small group were now in the main cabin in conference with Captain Pitt. Van looked soberly at the captain as he asked this question. The rest looked interested. Who could "Crusty" be?

"You seem to be well acquainted with the doubtful members of my crew," returned the captain. "Crusty did not report and the men said that he is sick."

"The man who held me up wore Crusty's ring upon the hand that held the pistol, Captain Pitt."

"Come Van," kindly said Dr. Hill, "you are exhausted, I am sure. It is time for us to scatter."

Dr. Hill accompanied Van down to where their cabins were located and warned him against antagonizing the captain.

"Whatever his faults may be, Arvin," he said, "we must depend upon him, he is necessarily in charge."

"I suppose you are right, Doctor Hill,—even if

there is murder committed by his crew! I've liked the captain, but I don't know. He's a queer man and this is one queer ship."

"It is, indeed, Arvin, a queer ship! You must tell me the whole story tomorrow. We have only the bare facts. Have you any idea why they chose you for robbery?"

"Yes, sir. I will tell you, if you like, tomorrow. Goodnight, and thank you for keeping me from saying too much to the captain. I must be hot-headed."

"You have seemed very level-headed, my boy, and I admire your bravery tonight in rushing the man, to get out and warn us. Get some sleep as soon as possible."

A funny thought occurred to Van as he piled up his possessions as best he could for the night, and made up his bed with clean bedding which had been brought to him by one of the sailors. If "Arabian Nights," why not *Black Skimmer* Night?" He would write Mark a full account and call it "Nights on a Pirate Ship or After Dark on the *Black Skimmer.*"

CHAPTER X.

VAN ACQUIRES A CHUM.

ALTHOUGH Van Arvin was young, he was a clear thinker. Though he had his doubts about the captain, he had no right to think that he had been negligent, he decided. He would apologize. He met Captain Pitt on his way to breakfast and stopped him.

"Good morning, Captain Pitt," he said. "I think I owe you an apology for the way in which I spoke to you last night, sir. I was pretty well stirred up about what had happened, you see. That is my only excuse. I certainly can't blame you for what those pirates did."

The captain, who at first had looked at Van coldly, smiled a little now, though with his customary dignity. But it was hard to look down on the tall boy who met him eye to eye. "I am glad that you are in another frame of mind, Arvin," he said. "I think that you were probably mistaken about the attempt upon the safe. It would probably be as well after this if you leave running the ship to those who

are in charge." With this, Captain Pitt nodded and passed on, leaving Van rather sorry that he had apologized.

Of course, the captain had in mind, also, Van's running up with the story of the cry and the splash. Well, Van had done his duty anyhow, and he determined to find out whether Crusty was on the ship or not. Crook was not wearing Crusty's ring for nothing. Why should one wink at the brawls of wicked men and have no interest in one that might be injured? That was not what Van had been taught in Christian kindness. Keeping away from that sort of thing was wise enough, but if you couldn't help being concerned,—that was another matter.

Van was glad that he had decided not to tell the captain how the men happened to select him for their attentions. He would not tell Dr. Hill, either, though for the doctor's peace of mind. No use letting him know that Van had made these enemies. Van would handle that himself, if ever he met Crook and Blinky. He was rather surprised himself to recall that twice he had caused Blinky to take a tumble. But if Blinky ever had an opportunity at knife throwing—O boy!

Betty, whom he had, perhaps unwisely, told about the jewels, should know, and probably had guessed by

this time, the cause of the attack. He would also tell Mr. Abernethy, whose guest, in a sense, he was. There was an opportunity that very morning for a brief conference with Mr. Abernethy, in a cabin which he had fittted up for an office for himself.

"Yes, Arvin," said Mr. Abernethy, after hearing the full account, "this crew is a bad lot. I was surprised that Captain Pitt would engage such men and I frankly told him so; but he told me that they all were experienced seamen and that he had been hard put to it, as he said, to get a crew for this voyage. I have warned Juliet and Betty and Mrs. Jerome to keep their cabins well locked and to keep away from the crew entirely. I will gladly take the box and put it in my safe, though I'll not be responsible for what happens to it. I have already notified the captain to guard the safes particularly, though he thinks you came to a wrong conclusion about the attempt that was planned."

"I'd prefer that the captain did not know everything," said Van. "If I had told him what 'Crusty' said about Crook's opening safes, he might have seen some reason in my idea. I have told you the whole story, Mr. Abernethy; but if you don't mind, I'd rather that no one else knew. I'm sorry that I told Betty about the first part of it. It will only worry her

now. But I'll make this of as little account as I can to her. She insists upon hearing it."

"I agree with you, Arvin, that the least said the better. At Miami, and possibly at points nearer, I shall try to replace some of these men, without injuring them. I can pay them a little extra to get back where they came from. However, I really think that five or six, including the men who have left the ship, are the only dangerous men. The rest are rough but not actively criminal, in my opinion. I, too, want to find out what became of the man called Crusty. Come to me if you have any information, but avoid any further contact, if possible, with any of the rougher sort."

Van passed the matter over as lightly as possible with Betty. "They just held me up, Betty, and searched my cabin and me. The only chance I took was when I got out of the cabin, bumped into Blinky and knocked him down. You see I had his knife and I knocked the pistol out of his hand, while I ran for dear life, believe me! I was out of sight before he got his breath I'm quite sure. Terribly brave, wasn't it, to run like a deer for safety!"

"You needn't try to make it out nothing, Van Arvin; I'm glad that old box is in the safe now. They won't be after you to get it now."

"No one must know, Betty, that the box is there, not even the captain. If Crusty should appear, it's his, you know."

"If it's ever safe to do it, will you show me the diamonds, Van?"

"Of course I will. They are worth seeing."

Dr. Hill was easily satisfied in regard to Van's adventure. His mind was full of the coming expedition. "We start into the Indian River shortly. There are jungles easy to get at along the river on these keys. Collier has told you, I suppose, about how the pelicans nested for years on what came to be called Pelican Island. A guard was appointed to keep them from harm. But they must have preferred more seclusion, for they chose another nesting place. Collier wants to see both. We shall take you along. In the jungle on these keys I expect to find some specimens that I want. Farther south there will be different specimens."

"My belt and revolver were stolen, Dr. Hill, but I found my rifle in one of the closets that the thieves opened."

"You may not need arms at all until you can buy what you want. The Indian River is only an arm of the ocean, with salt water and tides. Alligators and snakes will probably want to avoid you as much as

you will want to avoid them. Be careful, however. Did you lose much from your cabin?"

"No, sir. They took my money that I had on me, and my watch that I had left in the cabin was with a little of my clothing in the closet with the rifle. I think that they had intended to leave by boat, sir, but left too suddenly when the ship was roused. Captain Pitt says that we were near enough last night for them to swim to shore. Bobby is sure that they are hiding on the ship."

"The little chap may be right at that, Arvin. But we shall be on guard after this. I can't have my assistant 'hi-jacked on the high seas,' whatever that may be. Get your kit in readiness, son. There will be plenty of room for whatever we need on the launch. I shall want your help presently, say in about an hour, to take what I shall need and stow it away in the launch. You didn't see it leave, did you? It has gone to get Davis's nephew and the engineer who is to run the little yacht for us."

Van went off in fine spirits. He had been making up his kit again, with his rifle and the fine fishing tackle which he and his father had used. This time, he wore his money belt and had obtained most of his money from them safe. They would be separated from the *Black Skimmer,* he thought. The more

the better, in his opinion. Van rather liked to have Dr. Hill call him "son." It sounded like his father. It would be great to be off with him, away from certain disagreeable elements here.

Bobby was trying to make a hero out of Van, to Van's slight embarrassment. He was much impressed with his having knocked down one of the "burglars." "You could have licked them both, I bet!" cried Bobby, catching up with Van as they left the tables at lunch. "Does your hand hurt much?"

"Who told you all that, Bobby?" laughed Van. "No, my hand does not hurt at all. It's just a scratch, but it looks better tied up, and besides, I shall want to use it a good deal on our trip. I'll unwrap it after we start, I think."

"Noble youth," murmured Dicky Gary from behind. "Was there a plot to dynamite the ship?"

"Scarcely," replied Van, knowing that Dicky meant to discredit any reported exploit of his. "Let's forget it, Bobby."

"Arvin doesn't like to remember being locked in his own cabin, Bobby," continued Dicky; but Van made no response to this. It was not important. As Van would have said, Dicky made him tired.

Black Skimmer affairs were all forgotten a little later, when Van stood on the starboard side of the

vessel, trying to distinguish the people on the *"Dauntless,"* as that trim little launch cut the waves toward the anchored *Black Skimmer*. The upper part was finished in mahoghany. Below it was white, with the name in large gilt letters. It flew the American flag that rippled in the breeze and Van felt glad that he had some share in her. They were anchored opposite New Smyrna and its key, called Coronado Beach, but the launch came from the Daytona harbor.

Dr. Davis presently brought the most important passenger of the *Dauntless* on deck, where Van had been detained by Mr. Collier. Otherwise he would have been where the *Dauntless* was discharging its passengers and crew. It had brought the engineer who was to run the launch for them.

"Arvin, this is my nephew, Albert Davis, of Daytona, Florida. He is to assist me, as you are to render 'first aid' to Dr. Hill. Glad, aren't you, Albert, that you will have a companion of your own age?"

"I sure am, Uncle Doc!" heartily said the new lad, as he shook hands with Van, and the two boys looked at each other with unfeigned interest.

"I'll leave you to him, then," said Dr. Davis. You

can get acquainted and Arvin can show you over the ship, perhaps."

"I'll be glad to do it," responded Van, and the boys were off together in a moment.

"Is there anything that I can help you about?" asked Van. "Got your luggage stowed away?"

"Yes; my trunk, with what I'll need on a long trip, is in my cabin, and my kit is stowed in the *Dauntless*. Say, isn't this a whale of a trip for us? No school, no nothin' but good times! My folks hated to have me miss school this year, but when they got more letters from Uncle Doc and a telegram or two, they concluded that I'd get more out of a trip with him than staying at home, and I can do the school stuff after a while. No telling when a chance like this would come. Is that what your folks thought?"

"I haven't any folks to amount to anything, and my guardian let me come."

"Oh! Uncle Doc said that the *Black Skimmer* was going to stop at Mosquito Inlet and that the launch would come for me. You see, Daytona is just north of the Inlet; or, rather, Daytona Beach is just north of Coronado Beach and the Inlet. It's the Halifax River above the Inlet, and the Indian River below it. Isn't that crazy? Same old sea all the time, between the keys and the mainland, you know."

"Dr. Hill told me that the rivers were only arms of the sea. Tell me some more about the place. It's great that you live here. You can tell me a lot of things that I want to know."

Albert grinned. "Maybe I can and maybe I can't. It depends on what you want to know. Here's where we have the wonderful beaches, with sand that packs smooth and hard enough to drive on. You ought to see the autos out at low tide. But once in a while somebody gets careless and gets caught in the sand."

"What do they do then?" asked Van.

"Somebody pulls or pries the car out; or if it's impossible to do it in time, a fellow just loses his car, that's all. But that doesn't often happen. People know *where* they can go and *when* they can go on the beach."

"What a name! Mosquito Inlet sounds sort of suggestive, I'd say!"

"We have 'em," laughed Albert, "but this is really the finest beach on the coast. The sand is fine and white and packs, you know. South of us they call it red shell, soft and reddish and full of what looks like ground shell."

"That is interesting to know. As I know nothing, you can tell me a lot about the country. I hate to

ask questions of Dr. Hill all the time; but I shall want to know everything that I can find out."

"Well, I've been in Florida long enough to know the state fairly well, but not the things that Dr. Davis and Dr. Hill study."

Albert was rather pleased at Van's respect for his knowledge, but too fair to claim more than he knew. It seemed as if the two sincere, honest lads could easily become good friends.

"I suppose that you have been in the jungles, and perhaps in the Everglades, too?"

"Yes, I've been in the jungles; but jungles here aren't always what you would suppose. Some of what we call jungles are just a low, close growth, full of skeeters. But the jungles with the big live oaks and other trees are just what your idea of a jungle probably is. The Everglades aren't exactly popular, except with the Seminole Indians, and I've never been there. The Everglades and Lake Okeechobee are a lot farther south. "

"I have been watching the coast, but I can't see much from here and I haven't noticed any palms."

"You couldn't tell, Van, this far off. But we have mostly the palmettos, or cabbage palm, and the live oaks covered with Spanish moss. You'll find real palms further south, for the most part."

By the time of the first meal together, Van and Al were well acquainted. Van felt happy and full of fun once more, instead of carrying responsibility on his shoulders. Here was a boy that spoke his language. They had compared notes about school, found out which form of athletics each liked best, and Al had the latest news in a paper which he had brought with him.

Like Van, Albert was interested in the wireless equipment of the *Black Skimmer,* and through Van he met the two operators. "I find that Arvin knows more than he claims," remarked the chief radio man. "He ought to work up for the examination and be what is called an amateur radio man."

In the Bluejackets' Manual, Albert was more intelligently interested than Bobby Abernethy had been able to be, and studied it with some care. "I don't know the parts of a ship as you do, Van, and yet I've been on a lot of the yachts that put up at Daytona. You ought to see the fine boats that these rich yachtsmen have when they spend the winters down here. They have a yachting club and races and everything." Albert was bending over the little blue book as he talked. "Of course, these names and descriptions are for the navy and about battleships, not ships like the *Black Skimmer.*"

"Which is an old freighter made over," Van finished.

"I know the bow and the stern," Albert continued, "and that the starboard side is the right-hand side looking forward, the port side on the left." Albert's eyes ran down the list of definitions. "And here are the 'scuppers!' I never knew what they were. So the little gutters around the deck have these holes and the water goes through them and off through pipes. Say, where do you send for this? I want one of my own some time."

"It costs a dollar, and you send to the superintendent of documents at the government printing office in Washington. Did you notice what it says about the compass?—that you mustn't have a knife in your pocket or any piece of iron or steel when you are near the compass. If the man at the wheel has, he will steer wrong and may run into a reef or something."

"Yes. I saw that. Here are 'signals.' Let's take this along in the launch, if you don't mind."

In this way the boys exchanged information. Both liked the water and boats. Both were more than casually interested in the object of this voyage. Both were keen for the adventure, present and future. They discussed having plenty of films for their

cameras, where Van could get a good belt and revolver, and when Albert spoke of making a collection of shells, Van was all enthusiasm. "Say! I'll learn 'em twice as fast, with you to tell me what they are!"

"I don't now all of them, and only the popular names for them. But Uncle Doc will tell us. We ought to strike some parts of the coast where all the shells aren't picked up every day as they are during the season in the resorts. Of course, every storm tears more of them loose and throws them on the beach; but around home you have to be up early to be the first bird to meet the surf! But did you say that you lost your belt and pistol?"

"They were stolen. Just as well to keep things well locked on the *Black Skimmer*, Al, though now all our most important things we'll have with us."

"For a while, anyhow."

CHAPTER XI.

THEIR FIRST TRIP.

THE morning was bright, as the *Dauntless* scattered the spray before her, on the way from the *Black Skimmer* to Mosquito Inlet. The girls and Bobby had protested at being left on board the vessel, yet this was distinctly a man's trip. At last Mr. Abernethy said that the girls might be taken across in the *Dauntless* to make an all day picnic of it, provided they were well chaperoned. If the *Dauntless* were too late in calling for them, or if it did not come for them at all, they could be taken to the *Black Skimmer* by one of its other boats. Mr. Abernethy, with several of those who called themselves the "amateur scientists," non-professional men who were going largely on Mr. Abernethy's account, and for the fun and excitement of the voyage, had a deep sea fishing excursion in view.

There was plenty of room on the launch, for it carried more in the way of equipment than in numbers of passengers. Glass jars, sacks, baskets, con-

siderable paraphernalia, whose use Van did not yet understand, were stowed away in various places. He understood that bugs and butterflies, crabs, sea worms, fishes and reptiles might look out if they did not want to be added to the several college museums here represented.

"Six solemn scientists," according to Albert Davis, who expressed more affection than reverence toward "Uncle Doc," conversed in dignified enthusiasm, or made sure that they had forgotten nothing.

There were Dr. Hill, wiry and alert, and Dr. Davis, taller, well-set, and a brilliant conversationalist, informed on many topics beside his specialty. On some of them he and Dr. Hill agreed to disagree, Van noted. Mr. Collier with his fine face, eyes as steady as Van's and an air of knowing what he was about completed the list of those whom Van felt he knew well.

Then there was a rotund and ruddy professor from one of the eastern colleges, who was always addressed as Professor Hartley by his colleague, a Dr. Gest, younger, dark, angular and active. The older man possessed a quantity of flying white hair that never would stay in place, particularly when the professor removed his hat, as he often did to cool off. "If I were Proff Hartley, said the irrepressible Al,

as they started, "I'd cut that hair shorter or wear a hair net!"

Van almost shouted at the vision of Professor Hartley and a hair net; but he restrained his unseemly mirth as well as he could, for the boys stood not far away from the gentleman in question.

Neal Evans, the sixth professional member of the party, was younger than Mr. Collier and probably not long out of college. He was known to interest himself in Juliet and even the younger and prettier Betty on occasion. Juliet already called him Neal, to the annoyance of the dapper Dicky. But Van did not concern himself with Juliet's flirtations. He liked the friendly Neal and was glad that he was going along. He had shown himself concerned and helpful on the night of Van's latest unpleasant experience.

Van was glad that as member of the expedition he was not available for what Albert termed "police duty," though he liked Betty and would have enjoyed a picnic under ordinary circumstances. It was Neal Evans who decided to stay with Dick, the girls and their chaperon. Bobby begged to go with his father, who consented to take him, though he wished afterward that he had not yielded, for deep sea fishing is no joke.

Truly the passengers of the *Black Skimmer* were

planning quite a day of it. Captain Pitt was busy with giving orders. For some time he conferred with the "pirate" who Van called Earrings and Betty Carruthers called Captain Kidd.

Noticing that Betty had brought out a good field glass, Mr. Collier invited her to sit by him in the launch and asked her if she, too, were becoming fascinated by the great number of birds.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Collier," she replied. "I know that I should like the beaches and the shells, but this catching the flying things under the field glasses and actually finding out what they are seems to make it all so much more interesting!"

Betty rather amused Van, for when they reached the dock and he was helping Neal Evans unload the lunch and other articles that the picknickers wanted, Betty scrambled out and turned her glass on the beach at once. "Oh, Van!" she cried. "Just look at the waves swirling on the beach—and those funny little birds just running as fast as they can! And what are those birds that are flying so gracefully out there?"

"There are your black skimmers," said Mr. Collier, leveling his glass as well.

Betty drew out her little notebook, devoted to nature now since the rest were keeping notes and she

said that she must not be out of style. Black skimmers added themselves to her list. Awkard brown pelicans, with their homely heads and strange bills, sat on sand bars in the Inlet. Sandpipers, turnstones, piping plovers and sanderlings ran along the beach, or out to meet the surf. A white bird, the immature little blue heron, stood out, at a distance, to fish, and an osprey flew overhead. A fascinating flock of least terns settled near them. This was fairyland to a girl who had lived inland, her only nautical experiences on a lake near her home town.

After depositing the picnic party, the launch was skilfully taken through the inlet and into the Indian River, where for some time Van merely looked. About Coronado the marshes were a part of a bird reservation, which accounted for their numbers somewhat. A flock of herons flew up river. Small gulls flashed their white wings here and there. The launch diverted its course to avoid some dolphins. Then it suddenly stopped near a bridge, while every one watched some herons in a low, marshy place at their right.

"Yellow bill and yellow legs, Van," whispered Albert. "It's the great white heron."

But Van was too busy to reply. A beautiful great blue heron, this great white heron, a snowy egret,

and what Betty afterwards called the "Lavender Lady," the Louisiana heron, stood for their inspection, in different spots. But the bridge opened for them and they were on and away again.

Mr. Collier was taking down notes and Van followed his example, saying to Albert that Mr. Collier always put the dates and often the hour on his notes. "He writes what the birds do, what markings they have,—everything."

"I'm too lazy, Van. Let me copy your notes."

"All right, if you think it worth while; but if I were you, I'd keep my own notes."

"I ought to. You ought to see Uncle Doc's note book: He makes chicken tracks, though, and I don't see how he ever reads them again."

"He should worry," laughed Van. "His secretary has to do that."

"It will break us up, Van, to read all the books that will be written after this expedition."

"Perhaps not so many. A lot of the information will go into their lectures. O boy! I'd like to be in Mr. Collier's classes next year!"

"Why not, then?"

"That, my dear Al, is more easily said than done. My worthy guardian says that what my father left

is all his; little Van will be working for a living next year."

"You have a 'stand in' with Dr. Hill, Van. Maybe he can get you something to do while you go to school there."

"He has spoken of it. Anyhow this is so much pie!"

The boys kept their conversation to themselves, not to distract the older men. They, too were talking, however, pointing out what interested them. Some wild ducks floating ahead of them proved to be only the common scaup ducks of which they saw so many later on.

The trees and bushes along the way were of as much interest to Van as the birds. There was little that was similar to what he knew in the north, though he saw some trees with leaves like those of the northern oak. But oaks here were chiefly the live oaks, with an entirely different leaf, as he could see even from a distance, and they were hung with the green-grey moss so common. Van could scarcely make up his mind whether he liked it or not. When it was old and tattered, it gave a funeral appearance indeed.

It was an odd experience to be taken from a ship, with no intermediate stages of travel on land, and

set down in the midst of this semi-tropical country. He would soon be in the jungle, where he could examine the palmettos, live oaks and other growths to his heart's content. It was a fairyland of nature, in its more beautiful aspects, as well as in some very curious ones.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE JUNGLE.

THEY stopped first at a small island in the river where Dr. Davis fancied that he saw something which he wanted to investigate. Birds were in the bushes and a little black Rail, identified by Mr. Collier, ran hastily out of sight from the mud along the bank. This was not the sea beach. Oyster shells were sticking out from an unattractive, shelving bank at this point, but there was a good place to land. The tide was going down and they leaped the mud to the sun-dried earth beyond. There was a narrow path along the edge of the bank, but none into the tangle beyond, and Van wondered what there was to find there.

Clouds of mosquitoes rose from the low jungle of scrub palmetto, scrub oak and other growths that even Albert did not know. Van started to pick off the blossom of a cactus with the usual result. It was a pretty yellow, but for some time afterward

Van was trying to get the tiny stickers out of his fingers. "I thought that the blossom itself looked as if it were free from pricks," ruefully said he, yet laughing at his own ignorance. "I'm going to give a cactus plant a wide berth after this," said he, watching Dr. Hill picking a flower here or a little plant there, "and if he collects any, I'll be mighty careful how I handle them." But Dr. Hill did not collect any cacti, that morning at least.

It was disagreeable without affording enough results to justify remaining here, and it was not long before the launch held the party again, making for the jungle of which Dr. Hill knew, where it was partially open, with a road from which they could make excursion into the original tangle if they wished. This sounded practicable and when, in the midst of islands and peninsulas and curving waterways of the river, they came to a high bank, where a rude dock of two or three boards offered a place to bring the launch, and a steep path led to an old shack at the top, they decided to land. A cool breeze blew from the river. The sun was very hot, but they had brought water and fruit, and ate a light lunch before separating. Dr. Hill explained about the roads that they would find and the location, and asked them all to meet the launch at a certain time.

"Look out for snakes," said he, "there is nothing else. This is the lower point of an island and the ocean is reached by that overgrown road there. You can scarcely get lost, unless you wander north in the heavy brush, where the island widens out. Just be sure that you know where the ocean is, and you will be able to find the river, or *vice versa.* I'll not need you, Van. You and Albert can do what you like. Davis and I are going together."

Mr. Collier announced that he was starting out alone, which was the best way to find birds, though there were other attractions for him as well.

This left the boys to their own devices and well were they pleased. Albert performed a Zulu dance, or something that looked like it. "From all indications, our duties are going to be light, Van," said he. "I've got a pocket full of films, and my camera. We'll investigate the jungle, kill a few rattlesnakes, perhaps, and go to the beach to gather shells, and swim, too, if you like, or wade. I'd like to find a paper shell nautilus, and this beach, where hardly anybody ever comes, so far as I know, ought to be a good place."

Van approved of his chum's program and started out happily. The road was well grown up with what Albert called switches, tough weeds which made going a little difficult. But there was no hurry about

arrival anywhere. The time was theirs. Albert went first, to scare off the snakes, he said, and Van really thought he had some idea of protecting him and was accordingly grateful, though amused at the idea that he would need it. He felt, however, that Albert really knew conditions in this locality much better than he, and he was quite content to be led.

At this time of the day there were few birds to be seen in the thick jungle, though a little palm warbler cheerfully wagged its tail at them before it disappeared into a bush. Albert did not know what it was, but Van had seen it in the north and recognized its chestnut head, and the streaks on the sides. "I'd know it by the way it flips that tail, if I didn't get a good look at it," said Van, showing Albert its picture in his field book.

"I don't see how you tell the warblers apart," was Albert's comment, as he took the little book and looked hastily through the pages devoted to the wood warblers.

"I don't know many of them," said Van. "I'm just beginning, yet there were several that Dad and I saw often."

But there were other things to take Van's attention. He broke off a few leafy twigs and picked a blossom or two here and there, to ask Dr. Hill about

them later on. At one wide-spreading live oak he stopped and said, "Al, just look at all the things there are growing on this. Do you know what they are?"

The great tree was one of the most beautiful of its kind. Its thick branches, large as the trunks of ordinary trees, spread widely in all directions, bearing other smaller branches and twigs and the characteristic small leaves. The jungle was a little more open at this point. But what impressed Van were the growths that it supported. Albert pointed out those that he knew. There were air plants, large and small, moss, and a thickly growing fern that Albert said was called the "resurrection fern." Take off a bit, with the moss and bark it's on, and put it in your pocket. It will all dry up, but if you put it into water it will get green and pretty again. Say, you ought to send home some leaves from the chandelier plant, or 'Japanese lantern.' Tell 'em to pin up the leaves on the curtains in the windows and watch. The leaves will dry up and pretty soon some little roots will start out and then green little leaves on a stem and there you have some plants ready to set out."

"What kind of a country *is* this anyhow?" laughed Van.

"*Some* country," said Albert, picking a slender

plant from the same tree. "I think that this is a tree orchid, but we'll have to ask my uncle or somebody."

Van carefully took off a trailing bit of the tree fern that seemed to grow like a vine upon the bark, and likewise detached a little air plant with slender leaves, to put in his pocket. "I'll get some big air plants when I come back," said he, "for it I miss this tree, there are plenty everywhere."

Palmettos were odd to Van, but when later on he saw palm, further south, the palmetto did not mean so much to him. "Somebody has been over this road recently," said he, noticing how some of the tall weeds were bent down, and that there were a few marks of wheels occasionally in the sand.

"Do you judge that it was a one-armed man with a glass eye, by the width of the wheel tracks, Sherlock Holmes?" grinned Albert, looking back.

"No; I think that we may find a Rolls-Royce, very much scratched by its trip in the jungle, and rigging up sails for a trip across the Atlantic. Al! Jump ahead!"

As Van raised his voice in that sudden exclamation, Albert lost no time in following Van's direction and gave a flying leap forward.

Turning at once, after taking several steps for-

ward, he saw his chum picking up a heavy stick from the side of the road, and a rattlesnake at full length across the road, rapidly disappearing into the thick undergrowth in the jungle at their left. "Better leave that old customer alone," said Albert. "Did he strike?"

"I just saw him in time to call," replied Van. "He was coiled and ready for business, then struck out at you and just missed you. I jumped back as I called and he gave it up as a bad job. Say, but he was a big one! Did you see those rattles?"

"Yes. I forgot to bring my pistol, left it in the launch. If it were more open, I'd say to try for him, but I don't believe we'll hunt him in that thicket. Come on. If it hadn't been for our nonsense, we would have heard him. For a fact, Van, you hardly ever see them. I've been on a lot of picnics and never saw a one. They keep out of the way. But we'll keep our eyes open a little more. This road winds, doesn't it? If it had been straight, we'd have come to the beach long ago."

But now they could hear the sound of the waves and presently they came to the top of a high, sandy bluff. Before them stretched the beach below, strewn with shells, bits of wood, and old log or two, the remains of some trees blown into the waves or torn

loose from some shore. They were surprised to find a large boat tied to a post at the top of this sand dune. This isn't such a wild place as we thought," said Van.

"Wild enough," said Albert, thoughtfully considering the boat. "It looks like one of the boats from the *Black Skimmer*. Say, did you hear those boats last night? I could not sleep very well, though my berth was comfortable enough. They were very quiet about it, but a boat left the ship, then a boat came and left again. I don't know whether it was the same one or not. Trying to listen made me sleepy."

"What would a boat be here in this jungle for?" asked Van.

"Some kind of smuggling, I suppose."

"We are here and we are not smuggling."

"No; I suppose that this big thing is here for research work."

"Ain't you the smart kiddo?" laughed Van swinging himself over the sandy shelf and running down over the rest of the dune, which sloped to the shore. His shoes sank into the soft, red-brown sand. Theirs were the only tracks there. Whoever may have come and gone, they had the beach to themselves. They

had noticed that there were no oars in the large boat.

"This doesn't look like the beach at the Inlet," Van continued, picking up a large shell that lay at his feet.

"No. You remember what I told you about it's being red shell farther down. This is it."

Van picked up a handful to examine it, letting it run through his fingers. "Bits of shell, of all sizes," he said. Then he looked at the shell that he had picked up. "It's an old one, but I guess that I'll keep it, the first shell on a southern beach for me. It's a wonderful old thing, worn by I don't know how many waves."

"New ones, or perfect ones, for me," said Albert, starting along the beach for new specimens. Van followed him at first, but saying that "to avoid serious quarrels" over treasure it might be as well to separate, he soon turned his back upon Albert and skirted the waves in the opposite direction. "Come on when you feel like it," called Albert, disappearing around a curve in the shore.

Van stood alone, looking out at the sea, the low-flying pelicans, a ship in the distance, the surf swirling at his feet. It seemed like a dream. This was what he had always longed to see, to be a part of it.

He walked slowly along now, picking up shells till his pockets were full. In places, back from the water and near the dunes, there were quantities of shells, almost in heaps, deposited by ever recurring tides. He must bring a sack; no, he must help the man by whose arrangement he had this chance to travel. He could ordinarily take only necessary things of his own. But it was so warm that he was carrying his sweater now, and tying the end of it, he used one sleeve for a container. Shells little and big went into it. One sort was particularly beautiful in colors and markings. Van could not resist collecting many of these, as there was many a variation and the cameo-like substance was so attractive. It was a bivalve, Van knew.

Now what was *this* odd and delicate one? Van was looking along and under the sandy reef, cut down by some storm. Why, this must be the "paper shell nautilus." Pearly, delicate, it was well named. Now Van had something definite for which to search. Eureka! Here were two more. He was rich. What were diamonds and rubies in comparison with the riches of the sands? The abandoned homes of molusks and what not had something to teach Van. He felt very ignorant, but he did not intend to remain so.

Now Van turned to go back. Albert must have gone a long distance, but Van enjoyed being alone here. He was surprised to find how far he himself had walked, led on by one thing after another. There were few birds on the beach however, which was a disappointment. It was past noonday and hot. The birds had fed earlier and Van knew that it was not their time of activity.

He rounded the curve where Albert had first disappeared and saw Albert sauntering back, close to the water's edge. A long, heavy beam from some wrecked vessel lay on the shore. On this Van sat down to wait, deciding to throw away some of his gathered shells.

Albert Davis was a "good scout," Van decided, as he looked at his new chum approaching. He was not as tall as Van, but of medium height and of straight, light proportions. His face was round, rather dark-skinned, with hazel eyes, and what might be a fairly generous nose and mouth, permitting a wide grin.

Albert's pockets were bulging, Van saw. "I suppose that you have been picking up the whole beach," was Albert's greeting. "I've got a few myself, hate to leave 'em, don't you?"

"Tell me what some of these are," said Van, draw-

ing out some of those in which he was most interested.

"I only know the popular names for them," said Albert, "but we'll ask about the other."

I think that Mr. Collier will let us look them up in his shell book. I've been reading up on birds, but I looked over that book on sea-weeds and shells and things on the beach."

"Well," said Albert, "that is part of what they call a 'heart shell.' See,—when you put the halves together and look at it sideways, it is in the shape of a heart. This little thing that looks like a boat with a seat in it is a 'cradle shell,' and that little yellow one is a 'baby foot' or a 'jingle shell,' because several of them jingle together like silver,—almost.

"I see that you have two angel wings. Be careful of them, they break so easily. You did well to find two perfect ones. They do look like wings, don't they? You have a lot of calico shells. I like them, too, for they have such pretty colors. Going to take some to the girls? I thought that I would. I don't know that I ever saw such different ones. I guess no one much comes here, no one after shells anyhow. What? Oh, yes,—those are all bivalves. I know that much anyhow!"

"You know a lot," answered Van. "What is this?"

he asked, holding up a little shell, long, oval and shining. It was the "*oliva literata,*" but Albert did not know it by that name.

"That is a key shell," he said, "and that pretty one with the lines going around it so evenly is a music shell, or tulip shell. Maybe it reminded some one of the lines of the staff. That is what Mother said. She likes shells, too, and so does Dad. We'll have to get some book now, and find out the right names."

"These do pretty well," said Van. "I suppose that this is a star fish, isn't it?"

"Yes, and I see that you have a sand dollar."

"The artist has drawn a five petaled flower in the center," remarked Van, "That is the most curious shell of all, I think."

The boys sat and talked and watched a few gulls that descended feet first into the waves near them and floated there. Finally a few little birds flew in among a pile of sea-weed and began to feed. Van watched them through his binoculars. "There are three there, Al," he whispered, "that are curiously marked, and see how differently they feed, turning up everything."

Van watched, took notes, and watched again. Then, when he thought that he had every point that he could think of about these, he scanned the rest.

They were much alike, so easily called just sandpipers, but Van was learning not to be satisfied with that. While he watched, they took fright and flew, circling out over the tossing surf and away. It was Mr. Collier, who was coming toward them with smiling face.

"Well, boys, what luck? I scared away your birds, didn't I? I saw several turnstones among them, calico birds they call them."

"That is it!" cried Van, "those little things all variegated and funny that turned up everything! 'Calico' shells and 'calico' birds!"

Van had forgotten to show Albert his specimens of the paper shell nautilus. Intending them for a surprise, he had covered them with his sweater and forgotten them in the excitement of other things. Now he thought of them. "Say, Al, I fogot to show you what I think is what you wanted."

"A nautilus?"

"Yes."

Mr. Collier looked interested and said, "I was looking for them, too, but I did not find any."

"I'll give you each one. Isn't that the way things go sometimes,—the one who wasn't looking for them found them!"

"They are perfect, beautiful specimens," said Mr.

Collier, handling them with care. "Thank you, Van. "You would scarcely think that those tossing waves could deposit them carefully enough to keep them whole."

The return to the launch was interesting because Mr. Collier talked to the boys about the trees, bushes and vines and collected a few specimens on the way. The boys selected some airplants, ferns and orchids from some of the big live oaks, and Van determined to send Mrs. Wayne, Mr. Walters and Mark Hoyt a surprise package by mail as soon as he had the opportunity.

The older men were in a good humor when they, too, arrived at the launch, considerably later than the boys and Mr. Collier. Professor Hartley's hair was more unmanageable than ever, and as he ran his fingers through it in earnest conversation, it stood up wildly all over his head. "We had a good day," said he,—"but wait till we really get to work!"

"I want to get some specimens at this beach, Hill," said Dr. Davis. "I'll promise you plenty of work helping me tomorrow, I mean at the smooth beach at Coronado. We'll drive out there at low tide and see what we can find in the pools."

"That looked a good deal like one of our ship's

boats," remarked Mr. Collier, rather irrelevantly, as the launch started.

Albert and Van exchanged glances. "Yes, sir," answered Van, "but we did not see any of our crew around."

Standing in the front of the launch, on its neat deck, the boys watched the sunset colors on the clouds and river, and the herons, gulls, and smaller birds that were seeking cover for the night.

Dr. Hill, farther back on the deck, rested comfortably on one of the wicker chairs and said to Dr. Davis, concerning Van, "That is a fine chap, Davis. I wish that I could have him next year. I'll make a scientist out of him if I have the chance,—and will be satisfied with that."

"Yes, and then *he* never will be satisfied, Hill," laughed Dr. Davis.

"You are changing the use of my word. Well, who wants to be satisfied? I'd rather always hate something just ahead that I can't find but, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, Hill, I would."

CHAPTER XIII.

SURPRISES.

The picnickers had gone when the launch reached the Inlet, though they waited a little to see. It was quite rough over the waves to the *Black Skimmer* and the launch rocked; but it was throroughly seaworthy. Arrived at the ship, Van was welcomed by an enthusiastic Betty, who had seen birds to her heart's content under the tutelage of Neal Evans. It had been a fine picnic, though Betty wished that she could have seen the jungle as well and asked Van all about it.

"There is the 'low jungle' and the 'high jungle,' then," she said. "Were there any mosquitoes in the high jungle?"

"I had not thought about it," Van replied. "No, we did not notice them at all there. We walked between 'walls,' or interwoven screens, of trees and shrubbery of all sorts. Dr. Hill wants to get some specimens of sea anemone, if he can, in the pools the other side of the Inlet; so if you like, you can come

along. We'll land at the village and drive out on the beach at low tide."

"That means another day here. Good. There's Bobby, Van. He has something to show you."

"Hello, Van, come on down and see the shark that we caught. And we got a two hundred pound jewfish and I don't know what we didn't get!"

"Did you pull in the shark, Bob?"

"I should say not! You ought to have seen the time they had. It wasn't our boat that got him."

"How good he will taste, Bobby," said Van quizzically looking at Bobby.

"The jewfish, you mean," said he. "But you just want to look at that shark's teeth."

"Did you get it near here?"

"No,—miles away, I guess. It was the man with the earrings that got him, the one Betty calls Captain Kidd."

The names of our pirates are getting a little mixed, I guess, Bobby."

Bobby Abernethy escorted Van down to the lower part of the vessel, where they saw the results of the fishing trip, the shark, jewfish ond other fish which Van had never seen before. Here was fun enough in itself to render the southern seas delightful, though he might have no time for it, with his future

duties. But as he looked at the teeth of the shark, he thought that swimming far out at sea, or in shark-infested shallows, would have its disadvantages.

"Look at this sailfish, Van!" cried Bobby. "I thought that it was a sword fish,—see that long, pointed sword it has. But it isn't, and has that funny fin."

"That's its dorsal fin, Bobby," said Van with a great air of wisdom, at which Bobby laughed. "But the sailfish is related to the other. I guess that they must be first cousins or something like that."

Bobby looked up into the twinkling blue eyes above him. "You are awful smart since you've been reading Mr. Collier's books."

"You hit it, Bobby. That's where I got it all about their being first cousins or second cousins once removed or ——"

"Step-children," suggested Albert, who came up then to add to the nonsense.

But the boys were all delighted to examine the fish, which were more than they had to show for their trip in the jungle. Yet the jungle and beach, the salt river with its marshes and birds and the information so freely given in reply to their timid ques-

tions by the scientific men, made Van and Albert quite well satisfied with their day.

"Dad got the sailfish," Bobby proudly asserted, "and he's going to have it mounted. They fix 'em some way."

After dinner, while Van was showing Mr. Collier's shell book to Betty, who was delighted with the shells that the boys had added to her growing collection, Albert strolled around the ship. He was impressed, as Van had been, with its odd arrangement and peculiar crew. Van had not as yet confided his last experience with the "pirates," though Albert knew of the lost belt and revolver, to be sure.

Not knowing why he should not go anywhere he pleased, Albert sat down on what he called "some contraption" on the third deck and was looking out to sea, for it was still light enough. Suddenly some one spoke. "How do you like the *Black Skimmer* by this time?" Albert turned his head to see a queer sailor with earrings and a head tied up in a bright handkerchief. It was the oily pirate known to Van as Earrings.

"All right," said Albert, in a friendly fashion. "How do you like working on her?"

"She's as good as any ship, I reckon. Some queer

things happen sometimes. Didn't that young feller tell yuh about losin' his dimuns?"

Albert looked up surprised. "His *diamonds*! First I knew he had any. I guess you're mistaken. He said that his belt and revolver were stolen. He isn't a wealthy chap at all. He said he had to earn his way. He's workin' for Dr. Hill now, if you mean Van Arvin."

"You just ask him where he's got them jew'ls he took off'n Crusty that night he threw Crusty to the sharks." The swarthy face was hard and the black eyes flashed.

Albert looked at the man incredulously and rather fearfully at last. "What on earth—" he began. The very idea of the man's charging Van Arvin with anything like that!

But a husky voice from nowhere that they could see interrupted him. "It war Blinky and Crook and you,—an' I'm ha'tin' y' fur it!"

"Crusty!" exclaimed the man with the earrings. "Say, he's clum up agin on the ship and been hidin'!" But Albert could see that the man was startled. He ran into every corner of the deck, climbed immediately to where he could see their immediate surroundings, and after he had been gone for some time, Albert, who had remained where he was, curi-

ous to see the outcome, saw him come slinking back, looking from side to side, his brows in a frown.

"Did you hear where that voice come from?" he asked.

"No, I couldn't tell."

"You ain't one o' them ventriloquists be ye?"

"No. Did you think that perhaps I said that?"

"You might of."

"How would I know the names of those men? I've forgotten now what they were. Didn't you think that it was the voice of some one you knew? Some one whom I never saw?"

"It was Crusty's voice. Say, do you believe in ghosts?"

"I never saw any. If Crusty's ghost is around again, let me know, will you?"

"No. You'd better keep out of this part of the ship,— but say, you let me know if that kid has the dimuns. I'm goin' to hunt the ship over for Crusty!"

"Better not," came again, in a hoarse, far away voice.

Earrings stood still, puzzled, angry, frightened, for, as Albert could see, he was superstitious enough to be uncertain.

"Somebody's fooling you," said Albert, smiling a little, though Earrings himself was far from attrac-

tive and Albert was thinking that he would get back to the main deck. But the man of the earrings was gone again, in pursuit of the mysterious sound, and Albert took that opportunity to slip away.

He met Van emerging from the main cabin to the deck, and beckoned him to a seat. "Say, what's all this about a man named Crusty that you are supposed to have fed to the sharks for his diamonds?" Albert was laughing, but he was looking keenly at Van to see how he would take this.

Van looked bewildered. "What? Say it again. *I'm* accused of doing away with poor Crusty! Well, that *is* a new one. Who—who has been juggling with my reputation? Dicky?"

"Don't accuse Gary. He's with Juliet, isn't he? I've just been having a session with a delightful pirate who wears earrings. If you have anything to say why you should not be charged with turning Crusty into a ghost, say it or else forever after hold your peace."

"Say, Al, really, that's gruesome. Would you like to have me tell what I know about Crusty and his diamonds?"

"I certainly would. Then I have a tale to relate that is equal to the immortal Shakespeare on Banquo,

or the ghost of Hamlet's father, or those other chaps that we read about in high school."

"Well, if you know anything that will give me some light on what has become of that pirate called Crusty, I'd have relief of mind."

"That sounds as if you *have* had something to do with the missing sailor."

"I should say I have, but not by any choice of mine. Crusty thrust his diamonds upon me, and at present they're in the big safe, waiting for Crusty himself, if the sea gives up its dead."

"Do you really think that he is dead?"

"Have you seen him, Al?"

"No. Go on, Van. I'll listen."

It took some time to relate in detail, to the interested audience of one, the incidents of Van's affair with the group of sailors who claimed the jewels, which Van described to Albert. Then Albert, who had only the last of the story, told of his encounter with Earrings. "Either some one was plaguing Earrings, as you call him, or Crusty was there in the flesh, or there is such a thing as a ghost," concluded Albert. "Let's have a search. The captain and Mr. Abernethy would only laugh at us if we told them."

Mr. Abernethy wouldn't. He believed what I

told him. It never occurred to me, Al, that any one might think I threw Crusty overboard."

"You are husky enough," laughed Albert. "I'm curious about this."

"Crusty was reported sick, but the captain found out that it was Blinky who reported that and Crusty wasn't anywhere to be found. I'm just going to tell this to Mr. Abernethy, if you don't mind, Al; or if you will do it yourself, it will be all the better. You see we are going to be away, and if there is any one in hiding he ought to be told."

"You are right, Van. Lead me to him. It will be fun to tell it."

The boys looked in from the door to where the usual evening company was gathered, but saw nothing of Mr. Abernethy. "He's probably in his office, Al. It's off the second deck. Let's go down and see, anyway."

Rapping on the office door, Van received an immediate response. It was Betty who opened the door. Her uncle was sitting by his desk in a part railed off from the big safe. It looked almost like a city office instead of a ship's cabin. "Come in," cordially said Mr. Abernethy.

"We can see you some other time, Mr. Abernethy," said Van, hesitating. "You are busy."

"No; I've just been having a talk with Betty about business affairs. I've made her a proposition that she is considering." Mr. Abernethy looked at his young niece with twinkling eyes, and her answer was an amused smile. "If your business is not private, I will keep my niece."

"She knows most of the story we have to tell, Mr. Abernethy. I'm sure that she may know it all as far as we are concerned."

Mr. Abernethy looked inquiringly at Albert, who aquiesced with a nod, saying "Certainly, sir."

Betty was greatly thrilled, she said, by the "ghost story." Mr. Abernethy said that he thought Van wise in letting him know. "There is a man whom I can trust," said he. "I will go with him, pretending to be searching the ship for something else, and we will se that every corner of the ship is searched for Crusty. It must have been he, or some one who could imitate his voice, since the other sailor was so impressed by it and thought it Crusty himself."

"I was just thinking, Mr. Abernethy,—wouldn't you all like to see the jewels in the box They are very pretty."

"Oh, yes, Uncle," urged Betty.

"If you say so, then," said Mr. Abernethy to Van, "I'll get out the fatal box. No ones knows the com-

bination to this safe but me. If your box is not here, I must be the one who stole it."

"You are quite welcome to it," said Van, smiling, while Mr. Abernethy busied himself with the knob.

From a recess in the safe, Mr. Abernethy drew the package which contained the curious little box. He handed it to Van, who, in turn, offered it to Betty. "Will you open it?" he asked..

"Better lock the door," she said, fearfully. "They have caused enough trouble already." But she drew the box from its wrapping.

Carefully Betty placed the small box on her lap. Slowly she loosened the cover. There lay the dingy wad of cotton. "You need to have your box washed," she said, "and to get a new piece of cotton." Cautiously she lifted the cotton out, feeling of it. "Why,—Van,—there isn't anything here! Were you fooling us?"

"No, indeed," said the puzzled Van, leaning over to pull the piece of cotton apart. "But say, I didn't open it after I took it out of the cough drop box. I wonder if those men *could* have found it after all!"

"They didn't act like it," suggested Albert, who had drawn out a detailed description of the search party. "Could some one have gotten into the safe? Old Earrings evidently thinks that they were in exis-

tence, Van, or I might believe this a peice of imagination."

"I've been accused of helping Crusty to the bottom of the sea, so a little thing like making up a wild tale of seeing some handsome jewels, Betty, is nothing."

"Poor Van."

"You are a sleight of hand performer, Betty," suggested her uncle. "Bring forth the gems!"

"No fair teasing that way, Uncle. You all saw me do everything."

But Mr. Abernethy was examining the safe. No money was missing. "Some expert has opened this, Van, or some one who has found the notation of the combination. I have it down in my notebook, but that is always in my pocket. It would have been necessary to enter my cabin at night,—or,—well, I will question my valet."

"Is he trustworthy, Mr. Abernethy?" Albert asked.

"I think so. I have had perfect confidence in him."

"So far as I am concerned, nothing need be done," said Van, "and I think that Crusty is where he will not care whether I have kept my trust or not. It has been no pleasure!"

"Perhaps Crusty is hiding out and got them himself," said Albert.

"Perhaps he did."

"Have you looked to see if there are any more in that box?" asked Albert. "It looks large enough to hold more than the three stones you told me about."

"It *is* rather thick at the bottom, Van," eagerly said Betty holding out the box to Van.

Van took it, looked at it, tapped the bottom within and handed it to Albert who did the same thing, and then took out his knife. "It's pretty thick at the bottom," said he, "and that cotton is sticking in a crack."

"Wait!" cried Betty. "Perhaps there is a spring!"

"Your fingers are smaller. You try it." Albert passed the box back again to Betty, who rose, held the box to the light and inserted her fingers, pressing in different spots. "That is a thin piece of wood on the inside of the bottom, Van," continued Albert.

Van nodded. He had noticed it.

But Betty found no spring. Van took out his own knife and loosened the thin piece of wood till he could pick it out with his fingers. He then held out the box for inspection by the rest. There under a thin veil of cotton, lay closely packed stones that shone even through their covering under the light

that was above the desk. Mr. Abernethy opened the desk drawer and took out a small ruler. "Three-eighths of an inch between the false bottom and the real bottom," he said, measuring the box after Van had overturned it, receiving its contents in his handkerchief spread on the desk. "The cover fits down some distance over the top, which makes it seem right to have a thick bottom. A pretty diamond does not take much room, but I suppose those others were much larger?"

"Oh, yes, sir; very large and beautiful. I wonder if Crusty knew about these."

"No telling. What shall be done with them, Van?"

"If you are willing, I will snap the false bottom in again and return the box to the safe."

"And chance its being opened again?"

"I suppose so. I know that I don't care to have them or to put them in the charge of any one. They are too dangerous." Van bundled the stones back into the box and replaced the thin wood above them, with the lump of soiled cotton to make it all solid. Mr. Abernethy replaced the box where it had been before and closed the safe.

Betty, who had fingered the shining stones as they lay in Van's handkerchief, sighed. "I hope that you

don't lose these," she said. "Are they valuable, Uncle?"

"Diamonds are always valuable, Betty, and those few sapphires were good. They are not of unusual size, but if Van is Crusty's heir, he has probably two thousand dollars worth of well cut stones there. Did you count them, Van?"

"Yes, sir. There were about twenty good stones there."

"Besides the little ones," added Betty. "You wouldn't think it, to look at the box, would you?"

"The bottom is an inch and a half," Van reminded her, "by an inch and half thick, by the three-eighths of an inch high. The whole box is two inches in height. Room enough, with the stones packed as they were, and are. But if I am Crusty's heir, Mr. Abernethy, I'll never take possession of these, to use them, till I know surely that Crusty was drowned. Even then, who knows that they were his?"

"Wealth is never going to upset your level head," joked Mr. Abernethy.

"Im going to earn my own money," said Van, "if I get the chance; and I think that I will. Anyhow, I'll not begin with what belongs to somebody else."

CHAPTER XIV.

SEA ANEMONES AND MORE MYSTERY.

VAN was quite thoughtful over the new development. He cautioned Albert about Earrings, though Albert himself felt that he wanted to keep away from him. "He wanted to know, Van, if you had the jewels. I think that he was sincere, for if he were the one who took them from the safe and the box, he would scarcely say anything about them,—unless possibly to divert suspicion. You are the chap that wants to look out for him."

"You are quite right, Al, and look out I will when I'm on the *Black Skimmer*. I'm sorry that I did not show Mr. Abernethy and Betty the diamonds and that other fine stone, while I had them. I'm not worrying much over my responsibility to Crusty. It was up to him to look after his booty. I didn't want it."

"The other stones will give you an education, or some of it, won't they?"

"I'm not counting on them. I'd rather stand on

my own feet. I don't mind working. A lot of the boys don't get much out of college anyway, except a few college yells and a fraternity pin. I've seen some of them come back."

"But you'd get something out of it."

"That I *would* if I had to work for it, believe me!"

Events more interesting pushed the latest *Black Skimmer* mystery out of the boys' minds. Not a day here was wasted. The amateur group was still picnicking or fishing. By launch or in row boats the scientists were out amost constantly and went to see the nesting places of the pelicans. Mr. Abernethy and his family and guests were meanwhile motoring to the towns along the coast, bathing and swimming at Coronado and Daytona beaches. The girls picked up different souvenirs and Betty now wore a brown necklace made from the little cones of the Australian pines, or a gay one of black and scarlet seeds.

The postponed trip to Coronado Beach came next. The girls had stayed over night at the hotel on the beach there, and Betty was afraid that she would miss the scientific expedition. But fortunately, at low tide, Dicky wanted to drive up to the Inlet, and with Juliet, Mrs. Jerome and Dicky, Betty arrived just in time. There were Dr. Hill, Dr. Davis and a few others, with Albert and Van. Albert was chief

assistant this time, for Dr. Hill was only in this for the fun of it, he claimed. "What are sea-anemones to a botanist?" he asked.

Betty looked puzzled and asked Van what he meant.

"These things they are after now, Betty, are really animals, you know. But if they find any here, they'll put them in something and you'll see them waving about with their tentacles and forms like flowers. I've been reading about them. Some are very beautiful."

But there was nothing for Van to do, Dr. Hill said, and as the beach was full of tiny sandpipers at this hour, just before sunset, he strolled off with Betty to see them. A whole flock of least terns settled on the beach close enough to be well identified under the glasses. Among the dunes, also, a host of slender forms were flitting, and going up to see them, they found more shells for their collections, frail shells of sea-urchins, some particularly pretty "music" or tulip shells and a curious, big *"semi-nuda."*

"These," said Van, with a great pretence of wisdom, "are, I think, the *Fasciolaria distans* and the *Fasciolaria tulipa,* known to the vulgar herd as music shells,—and this big thing is the *Pinna semi-nuda."*

Betty, stooping to dig out a pretty olive shell from

the sand, shook her head. "I think I'll stick to the names of the vulgar herd, Van. How will you ever get it all?"

"I'm beginning mildly, Betty, looking up the name of every shell I get. And then I'm learning the big divisions of classification first. Now it's easy enough to classify a shell as a bivalve, isn't it?"

"Certainly, two parts, like oysters and clams, and this angel wing is one of two, isn't it?"

"Yes, and those spiral, one-piece shells are Gasteropods. But it will, Betty, take me a long time to get what I want, and then it's only a beginning of knowledge. But that is the fine thing about it. There's going to be enough to keep us going as long as we live."

Bright, dark eyes looked at Van with a sparkle. Betty, too, had ambitions. How pretty she looked, with the golden light on her sunny head. "Isn't it funny," she asked, "to think of a mollusk as 'carnivorous!' Neal Evans told us that the animal living in one of those shells with a canal at the aperture is 'usually carnivorous.' "

"Yes; the 'drill' makes a little hole in an oyster shell and eats the oyster. You'd think that the little holes in some of those shells that we find was made by birds, wouldn't you?"

Betty's hands were full of shells by this time and she suggested that they go to the pool again. "By this time they ought to have found something," she said.

Dr. Hill and Dr. Davis were in their element. Albert was holding a sieve, through which Dr. Davis was pouring sandy water. Dr. Hill was digging with a small shovel, getting himself all wet and not caring at all. He shook his head and waved Van aside when he offered again to help. "This is fun for us old boys," said he. "Go and look at birds."

Across the tossing waters at the Inlet Van and Betty looked at the other shore, the sand bars full of birds, the low clouds tinged now with sunset tints. A clear pool was beside them, where the sand lay packed in ripples beneath the water.

"Look, Van," cried Betty. "Here it comes again!"

Van watched where she was pointing. One of the black skimmers from a flock of them by the other shore, was performing the act by which it gets its name, skimming over the water and coming so near that without a glass they could see every mark and the coloring. There went the red bill, the long lower mandible in the water to gather in desired morsels, the other, shorter, open above, and snapping down occasionally. How beautiful were the black above

the white beneath, the red of bill. The strong wings were literally skimming the waves.

"How does it manage it, I wonder," said Betty, "to keep just so far above the water, and not to splash with those wide-spread wings! Well, I know the black skimmer now. It's decidedly prettier than the old boat that is named for it. Van, I believe that I'd rather learn things right in the open, by seeing them, than to get them in college. I wish I could just keep right on traveling!" But Betty wore a whimsical smile as she made this observation.

"I agree with you," Van answered. "But all of us can't travel all over the world, you know; and college is a quick way of getting a little about everything. Then there's philosophy, you know, and such things."

Van did not see Dr. Hill, who had come up behind him to watch the black skimmer. He was surprised to hear a little chuckle behind him. "So you think that you only get a little of everything in college, do you?"

"Oh, sir,—" began Van, rather embarrassed.

"You need not apologize. It's true. I rather suspect that we give our boys and girls very little in comparison with all that there is in this great universe. But we try to start them right,—just to start

them, and give them an idea of what there is. Did you get a good identification of that black skimmer?"

"Perfect!" Betty exclaimed. "I shall never forget it!"

"Collier said that when Abernethy wrote him the name of the steamer he decided to go," said Dr. Hill. "Now, Van, as my assistant, have you a towel concealed anywhere about you?"

Van looked inquiringly at Dr. Hill, though he was getting used to the doctor's kind of jokes. "No, sir," he replied, "but I have a large handkerchief in my pocket. See?" and Van flourished a big handkerchief with a blue border.

Dr. Hill looked at it dubiously, then down at his bare feet. Betty tried to keep from laughing, but it was so funny to see the dignified professor with sleeves and trousers rolled, coatless, hatless for this work.

"Unfortunately," continued Dr. Hill, "I get the sand washed off in a pool, and then, by walking a little way I acquire again, as you see, a large amount of it. Now my shoes are in the car, which can not safely be brought near the pools. The shoes might be brought, but there is no suitable seat at hand. You don't see any overstuffed armchairs among the sand dunes, do you?"

With this question, Dr. Hill abruptly turned and waded into the clear pool at hand, where his feet evidently felt more comfortable. Wading was pleasant in this climate. Who said that it was November?

Van, grinning, stripped off his old sweater and spread it out just beyond the edge of the pool, looking up as he did so into the twinkling eyes of the professor.

"Sir Walter Raleigh," said Van, with a flourish, by way of introducing himself in a new role. "Step out upon my cloak, I pray you, most learned professor! Hey,—Al!"

"You are sure that I will not injure the handsome garment?" queried Dr. Hill, lifting one foot to rinse it in the clearer water before stepping out.

"What is a little sand and water in our profession?" laughed Van, who could have thought that he had returned to the days of joking with his father.

Albert, who was standing beside his uncle at a little distance, turned at Van's call and in a few strides had reached them.

"We'll take Mahomet to the mountain, Al, so make a chair with me for the professor of botany—and other things. Which is a sea anemone, Dr. Hill?" asked Van, inviting Dr. Hill to the seat on strong young hands.

The doctor laughed. stepped upon the sweater, saying that he was not standing on his dignity on this occasion. Two laughing boys bore him to the car, where Van dried two white professorial feet with the big handkerchief and presened the doctor with his socks and shoes.

"Do you charge extra for valet service, Van?" asked the good doctor. "I am much obliged, boys, for a good ride. The chair was safer than the chair of science that I hold at the university. Not so many people would like to have it. It sagged a little occasionally on one side or the other, but if I were as sure of the foundations at the college as I am of you both,—is your sweater too wet to wear, Van?"

"No, sir."

"As to the sea anemone,—Collier and I are collecting specimens of all sorts. Neither is a slave to one phase of science. Follow our example, Van and keep your eyes open to everything. I do not know when I have enjoyed anything more than this."

Bobby Abernethy, who had appeared from somewhere, clad in a bathing suit and fussing at his father because the paternal advice was to put on something warmer in the cooler breeze, splashed into the pool and called to the boys to carry him out. But

Albert told him to "get the sand off his own feet" and informed him that only professors need apply for beach chairs. The Abernethy car, with several gentlemen, had now come out to the Inlet.

As dinner was soon to be served on board the *Black Skimmer,* and as the tide was rising rapidly, the cars soon left the Inlet for the ride over the smooth sands to the Coronado approach. Relentless waves and uncertain sands would swallow the most luxurious car with as little compunction as if it were the tiniest shell.

"How many new birds on your list, Van?" asked Betty on the way back.

Van showed her the page in his notebook, on which Black Skimmers were recorded in capitals. Cleverly, too, he had sketched the appearance of the flock, with their wide wings spread.

"Oh, you draw pictures, too, do you?" asked Betty. "I can do that. Look at my picture of a pelican!" She hastily turned several pages to show Van and Albert her "masterpiece." "To be sure," said she, "I did not think of showing this. It was just to remember how they look. I may forget when I get away from here. I'll think it all a dream, I suppose. Wouldn't it be jolly if we all got wrecked on a coral reef and couldn't get back!"

"Better not wish anything like that," said Albert, who had no more idea than Betty of an experience which would be theirs one future day.

"Exposure and danger are not good for girls," said Van, who had once been in a lake sail-boat with his father in a storm.

Gray dusk and misty, foaming waters were left behind them when again the party reached the lighted vessel. "Old *Black Skimmer*," said Betty, "I saw what you were named for today!"

Like the rest of the party, Van hastened to change his garments to those more suitable for dinner. Already Van was much changed from the saddened boy that left home under such trying circumstances. Activity and new companionship filled him with interest. He had a different sense of values since his father's passing, and Dicky had sneered about "Arvin's pose of indifference" in regard to the gems. But Van was sincere in putting them in second place. The opportunity of this trip was better than the very doubtful possession of some jewels. Albert had suggested another ethical problem. "If you find that 'Crusty' does not know about the stones under the false bottom, shall you tell him?"

As Van combed his hair before his mirror, he smiled to remember Dr. Hill and their carrying the

light, amused professor to the car. Sea worms, egg cases, queer coral and odd seaweeds, all sorts of things new to Van had been found. He could scarcely wait to look them up in the books.

And then Van's eyes happened to fall upon a piece of paper sticking out from under a bottle of listerine which had not gone back into his medicine case.

"Funny!" he exclaimed, removing the bottle and picking up the soiled paper.

"Ask me wher ure dimuns ar for to hunerd dolers i wil tel ti a red string on ure dore if u wil do it." Such was the note. A piece of red string lay by it.

"Shades of Crusty!" exclaimed Van, tossing aside the note. "The whole crew must have been in on Crusty's treasure!" He wondered, too, how much Dicky knew and where he had gotten his information.

CHAPTER XV.

BLACK SKIMMER GHOSTS.

"My cabin seems to be open to the public still, Mr. Abernethy," said Van meeting Mr. Abernethy on deck and handing him the note.

"Great Caesar! Aren't they through with you yet?" Then Mr. Abernethy read the note and frowned. "Did you put out the S. O. S. sign as indicated here?"

"I did not. But it looks as if the thief were still on the ship, doesn't it?"

"Yes, if this has any background in fact." Mr. Abernethy handed the note back to Van. "By the way, I have to go carefully about having the ship searched. I do not know how soon I will have anything to tell you in that regard."

"Yes, sir," respectfully answered Van. The only doubt which Van had about Mr. Abernethy was whether or not he had anything to do with the pro-

ject of which he suspected the captain. In case the ship carried something other than "ammunition," as suggested by the "pirates," when first he met Blinky and Bill, it would, indeed, be a risky performance to search the *Black Skimmer,* or to get the consent of the captain, assuming that he and not Mr. Abernethy were concerned. Van was tempted to undertake it himself, but how was the question.

That night Van discovered that his little party was to have the use of the launch, down the Indian River and to Miami perhaps. As usual, what they found, or expected to find would determine the next move of Dr. Hill and Dr. Davis. The *Black Skimmer* was to go on with the rest, scientists and amateurs, and plain fishermen and tourists that they were. "We shall not miss any of it, Van," said Dr. Hill. "You will enjoy those places later, though we may not be there so long. Royal Palm Park is said to have four thousand acres, to be kept in almost the natural state. At Paradise Key the jungle is practically West Indian, and royal palms grow wild, they say. The only thing that I do not like about this trip is that it is too hurried. Some of the party care more for the travel than for the opportunity in our line. Some day, Arvin, I'm going off with nobody except you. How would you like that?"

"Fine! Some summer while I am at college, sir?" asked Van with a twinkle.

"Every summer, more likely. But don't understand me as too critical now. Abernethy is giving us a good deal. He makes a fine patron of the sciences. "By the way, Arvin, are you a good writer?"

"I can write so it can be read."

"Can you spell? They have new fads now in the schools and most of my freshmen can't spell."

"My father attended to that, sir," said Van with a grin, "though I'll not vouch for any scientific words."

"All right. You see, I can't read all of my own notes sometimes. I have promised a series of brief articles, or letters to the college paper. Suppose I dictate to you and you prepare the paper."

So it was arranged, though Van was not a stenographer. He wrote rapidly, however, a faculty that Dr. Hill told him would be valuable in taking notes from lectures in college. Dr. Hill dictated slowly in the process of composing this for publication and Van wrote the first draft in pencil. With a few changes of Dr. Hill's written in, Van took the result to his cabin, where he copied it in a large, clear hand, as Dr. Hill had instructed. Rapping at Dr. Hill's cabin door, he found the doctor there, surprised at the rapidity of the performance. "Learn stenography

and typewriting, Arvin, and I'll make you my secretary!"

Van considered that jovial offer as he ascended to the main deck; but he would be a scientist himself, he thought, though the suggestion was not bad for temporary purposes. He intended to sit or stroll on deck a while to consider what sailor had Crusty's jewels, whether he ought to try to get them back, and what Earrings intended to do about it. Van was not longing to have any more encounters with these men. He tried to think what sailors had shown any special interest in him at any time, or were more or less with Earrings. He certainly had no two hundred dollars to offer for gems that were not his and gems wanted by several unscrupulous men at that.

As he strolled, wondering what had become of Albert and with half a mind to hunt him up, he had an interruption to his thoughts in the shape of Bobby Abernethy, who sleepily called from where he sat curled up on a bench, "That you, Van?"

"Yes. Say what are you doing here? You ought to be in bed or inside." Van sat down and put an arm about the little fellow, who drew as close as possible.

"It's cold out here, Van. Tell me about football."

"You ought to have a coat, Bobby. Come on, I'll put you to bed, Admiral."

"No," crossly said Bobby. "I'll stay here!"

The child was half asleep then, Van thought, but he was not looking for trouble and began to tell Bobby about one of his last games, with the result that Bobby was sound asleep in less than five minutes, within which time, Betty came, anxiously looking for her cousin.

"I was going to tell him a story to get him to bed," said Betty. "How in the world shall we get him there now? I hate to waken him."

"Easy as pie," returned Van. "Lead the way, if you will, and I will carry him."

Mr. Abernethy, amused, joined the procession, for he had been on the point of hunting up his son himself. Betty opened the cabin door, and Van, depositing the sleeping child on his berth, left the two of them to do the rest.

Dicky Gary was the next passenger to come Van's way, as Van resumed his meditations, though on the second deck. No one was there, and Van leaned on the railing of a narrow platform to look at the dark and heaving seas about them. The *Black Skimmer* had anchored in a new spot. It was foggy. Van could see only a short distance.

"Hello, Arvin, around by yourself?" To Van's surprise, he heard the voice of Dicky Gary, his second interruption.

"Yes. It's a dark night isn't it? But I like to monkey around the ship sometimes."

"I prefer company; but my girl is mad at me again. I'll be leaving you, I suppose, at Miami."

"Too bad, especially if you and your fiancée do not understand each other. I'll not see you, then, after tonight. I'm going down the Indian River in the launch. We start in the morning, unless there is a change of plan, and I understand that the *Black Skimmer* weighs anchor soon after that and takes everybody to Miami."

"I hadn't heard of it. That makes it worse than ever."

Dicky's voice was lugubrious. "You may know that I am not supposed to be on this boat at all. I don't see why I can't stay on for the entire trip, but Mrs. Abernethy wouldn't stand for it, and she will see her husband at Miami, of course; so it will be all up as far as he is concerned, too, unless Juliet consents to what I want her to do. I'll tell you a secret, Van, if you will not tell."

"Thanks. I'd rather not know any more secrets than I know now, Mr. Gary."

Van spoke pleasantly, but Dicky was offended. "It would be your duty to tell, I suppose," sneered he.

"Not necessarily," replied Van, refusing to take offense. "I'm sorry for your troubles. Juliet is a pretty girl, but wouldn't it be more sensible to let them take her on this trip and wait for her? They think she is too young to be engaged, Betty said."

"That is a fine theory, but Juliet is grown up at that, and Neal Evans or some one will get her away from me. Abernethy is a rich man and there will be plenty of chaps to court Juliet. I'll have to make the most of the time that they stay in Miami."

Dicky had now turned away, but he turned to add another suggestion. "Say, Arvin, if I could hide on the ship till they got started, couldn't you look after me, say in your cabin part of the time. I could fix it up with the folks later, I'm sure, provided I make it up with Juliet."

"No," firmly replied Van. "I'm sorry, but I could not do it."

"Nothing more to be said, then. Keep my suggestion to yourself, please," and Dicky nonchalantly walked away, displeased with Van and showing it.

Van himself was annoyed. Probably Mrs. Jerome would be next, or Juliet! Why couldn't every one leave him alone? He must look like an easy mark!

Van was very much of a boy yet and not always as patient as he might be, but under the circumstances and considering all that had already happened on this vessel, he was to be excused to some extent. He had thought Earrings employed, having passed him going on duty, as he thought; but to his surprise, and he started a little, he met him as he left the rail to go inside.

"Wait a minute. How's Crusty, *Mister* Arvin?"

"Stand aside, please," said Van. "I am going above."

"Oh, *are* ye?" asked Earrngs, standing more in his way than ever. "See here, young feller, I want them dimuns and *one ruby*. They were stole from me in the first place. When you made way with Crusty to git 'em, you didn't think that they belonged to any one else, did ye?"

"Now that is quite enough on that," firmly said Van, though there was no help near and he felt that he was in more danger, perhaps, than on any other occasion. "You know very well that I have not harmed Crusty or any one else. And I haven't what you want, either. Moreover, if I had them, I should not give them to you. Let me remark that there will be something doing if anything happens to me here, too. Let me past, please."

What could have happened Van never knew, for just then a husky voice sounded and Earrings whirled around and started back, putting Van between him and a strange vision, out of the sea, it seemed. Just above the railing a chalky-white face appeared, with big eyes that rolled and big red-blue scars. "Who made way with Crusty, Earrings?" the voice said. But Earrings was inside by this time.

Van, wondering, advanced along the narrow space between the body of the ship and the platform at this point, but the head was withdrawn, vanishing into the fog, and when Van reached the spot where he thought the appearance had been made, there was nothing to be seen as he looked over. A bit of rope dangled there, however, and Van looked at it thoughtfuly. Not believing in ghosts, he felt sure now that Crusty was on the ship. But he did look gruesome! Could that be the head and face of a living man?

There was no sign of Earrings when Van went back to the opening by which he would go inside. "I'm rid of *him* anyhow," he thought. He wished that "Al" had been with him, but when he arrived on deck and took a look into the cabin, he saw Albert talking to Betty. As he was not in the mood for society, he walked up and down the deck, finally

finding a bench on the lee of the boat where he stretched himself out at full length. The cool air was pleasant to him, in spite of the fog, and he could not bear to go below.

Some one had left a steamer rug on a chair near by, and this he drew over presently, tossing it around his shoulders. "I'll just take it easy here before going down," he thought, "and think things out." But in ten minutes he was as sound asleep as Bobby had been.

It was about two o'clock when he wakened at the sound of voices. He was wide awake in a moment and surprised to find himself where he was. He ran to the side of the ship and listened. Oars were dipping, softly, and below him he heard the voice of the captain in a low order.

That proved one thing to Van. If smuggling was going on, the captain had a share in it. That was why the crew was of the sort it was. *Could* Mr. Abernethy know? There was money in that sort of thing,—but suddenly Van happened to think that it would be well for him to reach his cabin before the captain knew that he was on deck. Evidently no one had noticed him, or he would have been routed out before this.

Quickly and cautiously, not to be seen by the watch, Van hurriedly descended; but Captain Pitt was even more quickly ascending. They just avoided colliding.

"Who's this?" growled Captain Pitt, taking Van by the collar of his coat.

"Look out," warned Van, though in a pleasant tone. "I'm not one of the crew."

"What are you *doing*, snooping around at this time of night?" the captain demanded, loosing his hold.

"I'm sorry I bumped into you, or so nearly. I'm not snooping, I must have gone to sleep on the bench up there. I was surprised to find myself there a few minutes ago. I'm making for my cabin, unless it's so near morning that I'd better stay up." Van looked at his watch as he spoke.

Captain Pitt eyed him suspiciously. "Go to your cabin, kid, and get to bed," he said, in a tone of disgust. "It's some time till morning. I'll have to examine the deck mysef, if you youngsters go to sleep on benches. Sleeping on deck is not allowed."

Glad to get away, Van followed the captain's directions, not sorry to have deceived him under the circumstances, though Van's nature was an open one.

He need not tell *all* that he knew, especially to "pirates!" But what a lot he would have to tell Al in the morning.

CHAPTER XVI.

CAPTURED.

VAN only dozed the rest of the time until dawn. He could not resist waking Albert Davis a little earlier than true consideration allowed, but rapped upon his cabin door, giving it a merry rat-a-tat-tat and keeping it up till a sleepy voice answered, "What's up? That you, Van?"

"*I'm* 'up;' are you 'up,' "

A grinning boy with tumbled hair admitted Van and crawled into his berth again. "What's the idea?" blinked Albert, though not inhospitably.

"I just had too much to tell you, Al," grinned Van. "I've seen the ghost, talked with Earrings, heard the boat start with its load of—um—ammunition and ran into the captain about two o'clock in the morning after sleeping on deck till that time, unconsciously a detective, you see. He collared me, but I looked so innocent that he let me go."

By this time Albert was wide awake. "Give me the details," he demanded, and as that was the pur-

pose of Van's early call, the details were related. "All I hate about leaving is not being able to hunt up Crusty. That is, I *hope* it's Crutsy, alive. It looked like him, though *awful,* Al. I declare, if I were a superstitious sailor, I'd believe in ghosts from now on!"

"He is probably playing the ghost to keep the men scared and maybe keep them away from where he hangs out, or is in hiding. Why do you suppose he hasn't been to see you, if he is able to be about the ship."

"That might be hard to manage. Poor Crusty is going to have a shock about his jewels. I'm going to take the others with me and put them in a bank at Miami for safety, as soon as we get there. I would let Mr. Abernethy do it, but I'm afraid to leave them on the *Black Skimmer* longer than is absolutely necessary."

"Did you get your belt and revolver?"

"Mr. Abernethy bought them for me in New Smyrna."

It was as well that there had been early rising, for many last things had to be done. Albert promised to bring Betty shells and coral from every beach; though Captain Pitt had said that they already had enough shells aboard to sink the ship.

"If a boat comes back after a while, please notice, Betty," said Van in a low tone, "who is in it, if you know any of the sailors, and if the captain receives it as a matter of course. I heard one leave about two o'clock this morning. I am not sure whether it would be best to mention it to Mr. Abernethy or not, probably not."

"It might worry him," said Betty, determined not to get any other meaning from Van's remark.

"Yes," assented he, and Albert nodded understandingly.

This part of the Indian River was becoming quite familiar to the boys. Again the day was fair, the sky full of puffy, white clouds. There was a large basket of oranges from which the boys and the rest might help themselves. The fruit was a little green yet, but good. Only Dr. Hill, Dr. Davis, Mr. Collier and the engineer were the only passengers on the *Dauntless* beside the two boyish assistants. It was great, Albert said, to have a whole launch to themselves, though they liked Professor Hartley and Dr. Gest.

When they reached the high bluff of sand and shells, with its landing and path which had led them to the jungle before, the two older men were discussing whether they would take the time to stop or

not. Van understood that there was some plant about which Dr. Hill was not quite satisfied. "It's some fungus or else an orchid," said Albert privately to Van with an air of deep learning.

Mr. Collier turned the scale by saying that there would be no return this way. It was now or never. At this Dr. Hill said that it was his desire to stop. They noticed that there were two rowboats tied at the rude dock. "I hope," said Dr. Davis, "that there is no picnic party here, but it will not take us long."

Again the boys were not needed. Albert asked his uncle if they might go to the beach for a swim and received permission, though they were warned not to go out too far, and to "look out for the undertow."

"Aw, Uncle Doc," said Albert, "I'm used to going in the ocean!"

"Yes, I know, but a shark may nibble your adventurous toes yet."

Laughing, the two boys started through the jungle for the beach. Van was rather glad of the advice. It was new to him to feel a tug at his feet and to have the sands slip from under him. With their bathing suits and a towel apiece, rolled up under their arms, the boys sped over the grassy road when once they had found it. They looked more carefully

for rattlers than before, but saw none. "If I were an Indian, Al," said Van, "I'd say that the bending of these tall weeds and a new mark or two in these old ruts showed that a wagon has passed here none too long ago."

"What'll you bet that we find the ship's boat, Van?" Albert replied.

"It will be there, but the man will keep out of sight."

"Don't be too sure of that, Van. Let's not get caught by any of them."

Not a sign of human presence marred the wildness of that glorious beach. The boys lay out on the sand between dips. Neither went far into the surf. Both kept looking occasionally at the spot where they had left their revolvers and belts. From those they would not be separated long. Van's money belt was in a locker of the launch, which they had seen drop down the river to be lost from sight behind the islands, a fortunate circumstance, perhaps, in view of the fact that the rowboats were soon to be called for by their owners, who were not using them for fishing purposes. In ignorance of the intruders, men and boats went upstream to a different rendezvous.

"Did I tell you, Al, that I marked that boat?"

asked Van, with a slight gesture toward the immense boat which lay where it had lain before.

"If you did, I've forgotten it."

"The old boat has many a mark, but I put my initial, a V, in a place where I thought it would be not noticed. It's but a scratch. That's what I was looking for while you ran on ahead."

"Did you find it, and why didn't you tell me?" Albert asked two questions without stopping, for Van's assenting nod answered the first one.

"I don't know, I had satisfied myself and you started some subject while we got ready to go in. I've been thinking about Crusty, too, Al. After all, that might have been Bill, or some one who knew Crusty well, somebody that wants to scare out Earrings. Glad as I am to get away, I almost wish that we had one more night to watch for 'ghosts.' "

"I don't. The sooner we get away, and the farther, the better for both of us. After Mr. Abernethy gets a new crew, if he does, and if we really start on a grand long cruise, it may be different. Let's get dressed. I feel like a sandpiper going to sleep in the sun."

After dressing, the boys spread their bathing suits on the sand to finish drying and gathered a few shells. Albert was jubilant over a perfect "Scotch

Bonnet" for his collection. Van tied his shells and bathing suit inside his towel and knotted the whole on a stick which he carried trampwise, over his shoulder. "Let's strike the trail," said he. In a moment Albert had followed his example and they climbed to the level of the road, heading for the meeting place on Indian River.

At the greatest turn in the winding road through the jungle, they were faced by what seemed to be a branch of the road, recently cut through, it seemed.

"I didn't notice this when we skidded around here going to the beach," said Van stopping to look. "It wasn't here before, seems to me."

"Let's go into it a little," suggested Albert, starting to investigate at once. Van followed, noting an especially large live oak ahead with wonderfully long branches, massive, crooked, and bearing green growths of fern and airplant. With his eye upon that, he followed Albert till both of them were surprised by stepping suddenly into a broad and more open road, where they heard voices. Here were wagon tracks. The voices were in the direction of the river and launch, but the trees and vines made a perfect screen and they could see no one.

"Careful," said Van, as Albert darted around a curve, thinking as he afterwards said, that he had

heard his uncle's voice. He stopped stock still, while Van, stepping beside him joined in his amazement.

There, piled by the side of the road, like a counter at a market were cases and cases, marked CUBA. In another place other receptacles, for the same kind of product, no doubt, were on exhibit. Loose sacking lay in a heap by the cases, and on top of one a dark bottle was sitting.

Van and Albert drew back in dismay, but too late. They had been seen. "Hey there! Stop! Halt! Do you want to get shot?" From an opening in the bushes and trees a man ran out into the road.

Neither boy cared to run before shots. They advanced into the road to meet the man. Still another came from behind the natural screen. "Spies, hey?" said this one.

"No, sir," replied Van. "We came from the beach, where we have been swimming."

"Who sent you here? Tell the truth now," came roughly from the first man.

"No one sent us," said Albert, "and I'm sure it's the last thing that we wanted to find in the jungle."

"We are as surprised as you are," Van added.

At a word from the second man, tall, handsome, grim, young, the first man, more roughly dressed,

relieved the boys of their revolvers, to their disgust, while with all their eyes they scanned the wild scene. Here were the great oak trees with their moss and vines, smaller trees and the palmettos, with the tangle of undergrowth, the beautiful jungle background. The road had been well driven over of late, and as the boys followed their captors, a good car came from toward civilization, defying the whipping growth that scratched it.

But a third man appeared behind the improvised counter, and took up the bottle. "Have a drink, boys?" he asked. "Got plenty to spare. Whole cases from Cuba, brought in by aeroplane, and we just got a lot of imported——"

"Joe!" sharply spoke the tall young man, too fine-looking for this business, Van thought, "That will do! Attend to your customer! Come with me, boys. You must stay here till we find out where you came from and why you are here, as well as what it is best to do with you. No slipping off into the jungle, understand. This is no joke. You will be shot."

He took them back of the cases and the screen of trees and bushes, pointing to the ground at the foot of a large live oak. "Sit there and don't move away unless you want something disagreeable to happen. Watch them, Pete!"

The boys sat down as directed, while the man called Pete pulled up an empty case to sit upon, not far away.

"Nice advertisement of the business," said Albert aside to Van, nodding to the too convivial Joe, who was trying to fill an order from the occupant of the car. But that man was in a hurry, impatiently helping load the liquor himself.

"I'm thinking about losing my revolver, for the second time," said Van, who, for once, saw no humor in the situation.

"You have your belt, at least. Perhaps they will give back your gun."

"Fat chance! What are we going to do?"

"Demand an early trial," replied Albert, grinning again.

But Albert lost his grin when they both heard Mr. Collier's shrill whistle, not so shrill in the distance, perhaps, but quite easily heard. "Suppose they'll take Mr. Collier for an officer and shoot him?" he asked under his breath.

Van's only reply was a look. Both boys were tense, waiting. Presently Van said, "Ought we to have told who is here? I was afraid that we'd bring them into trouble, but of course they will look for us when they get ready to start."

As Van spoke, the young man who was so clearly the leader passed near them. "Stop talking," he ordered.

"May I say something to you?" Van asked.

"Go ahead, but I'm busy."

"I am afraid that you will find the men whom we are with and take them for prohibition officers. We are with some scientists that are going down Indian River, collecting specimens,—that sort of thing, you know."

"Ho-ho!" roared Pete. "That was a good one to think up. Smart boys you are. Think up something else!"

"That is enough, Pete," said the chief, with a frown. "Molly!"

A woman, whom the boys had dimly seen through the bushes and trees, came up to the group now. "I was going to help Joe," said she. "Do you think that he can handle everything out there in his condition. Who's going to load that other truck?"

"Never mind, Molly. Sit down here and look after these boys. I'll send some of our men to round up these officers. How many are there?" The last question was asked fiercely of Van.

"Indeed, sir," said Van looking the man in the eye, "I am telling the truth. If you will instruct

your men to watch them a little, you will find out just exactly what they are doing."

There was no reply to this. The frowning and disturbed bootlegger strode away and the boys heard him giving low-voiced directions to some one whom they could not now see. Pete rose to leave, handing the woman a revolver. Those of the boys lay at her feet. "They look pretty young to be used as spies, Pete," she said, but she took the weapon as if she were accustomed to handling one and sat down on the empty case.

"Wife of the head man," whispered Albert to Van. "She takes a pretty chance, doesn't she?"

Van nodded assent, but he was very anxious. He had heard Mr. Collier's whistle again. Of course the liquor gang had heard it, too. If anything happened to those good professors, because of their prowling around, he would never have a moment's real peace again! On the other hand, *they* might have stumbled on the gang's rendezvous themselves. It was odd that the professors had not been discovered before this. But the men here were busy with their deliveries, or loading, Van supposed, and the professors' activities had taken them in another direction.

"Uncle Doc wouldn't hurt a flea!" exclaimed Al,

in a repressed tone. His mind had evidently been working on the same problem. "I hope that they go easy with him."

The woman who sat on the case, probably ten feet away from them, laid her revolver on her lap and untied one of the bundles that contained the bathing suits and shells. She smiled a little as she tossed the bundle aside again. Both boys eyed the revolver and were considering the same thing, no doubt.

"What do you think of jumping up, getting the gun away from her and beating it?" Albert whispered.

"Rash and no use," answered Van, "besides, if I'm going to fight it will not be with a woman."

"But it's a disgrace to be watched by one."

"She is only the immediate guard. Jump up, to run and see who would put a bullet through you!"

Albert followed Van's indicating nod and saw a man who was taking the liquor from another open case. A second car had arrived by the jungle road.

Both boys were aching for action. They would watch their chance, Van said, but it would probably be the best thing, since the professors were also in danger, not to stir up any more trouble.

Van stretched himself out by the roots of the big live oak and watched a little chameleon that had run

near him. What a new and odd, but beautiful place this was,—yet full of danger now.

Then came shots. Both boys instinctively sprang to their feet. "Sit down!" came the order from one of the men, one whom the boys had not seen at all, and as he came striding toward them, parting the bushes, they could see the outlines of a truck. The woman raised the revolver threateningly and her eyes flashed.

"I feel like an—an—ignominious coward!" exclaimed Van under his breath, as the boys again threw themselves under the tree. "But believe me, if the professors have come to any harm!" Van did not finish his threat.

"All we can do is to wait, see what happens, and get away when we can," said Albert. "But we can bring help, perhaps."

"Stop your talking!" they were ordered.

It was hard to sit still and wait. Ten minutes seemed like an hour. The boys did not know how much time had passed since the shots, for they were too much excited to look at their watches. But to their great relief, they heard voices that they knew. "Uncle Doc!" cried Albert, springing to his feet again, this time unrebuked. The woman was watching them, however.

Here came Dr. Davis and Mr. Collier, walking ahead of an armed man. "Hello, Uncle Doc," called his relieved nephew, and Van queried, "Where's Dr. Hill, Mr. Collier? Has anything happened to him?"

"He's all right," answered Mr. Collier.

"Another man in your party that we did not get?" quickly asked the chief, while Van regretted his impulsive question.

Dr. Davis smiled at Albert, as Mr. Collier calmly replied, "Yes. I told you, you remember, that our boat left on an errand. He was in that."

"That looks bad," said Pete to his chief. "They have sent word."

"What was the errand?" demanded the chief, but before Mr. Collier could reply, the chief's attention was directed to what Dr. Davis was saying to his nephew. The good doctor's hands were full of a varied collection, which he handed to Albert as he sat down, with the difficulty of a large man no longer young, upon the raised roots near the boys.

"Hill happened to think of something, Albert, that he had left on the *Black Skimmer*. Just like Hill to start off without something important. I'd advise you, Arvin, to take a list of his effects and look every time to see if he has them all! I think that it was his microscope, or his binoculars, or something

equally important." Dr. Davis laughed a little. It was reassuring to the boys that neither of these men seemed much disturbed over the situation.

Van noticed a glance exchanged between the chief and his man.

"We waited for some time," continued Dr. Davis, "after Collier whistled for you. Dr. Hill was fuming and searching the launch, and it was finally decided that he should go back alone. We took out enough equipment for a night in the jungle, in case he should not return, by some accident. We were about to have a lunch and whistled for you again. Then these gentlemen appeared, and fired a few shots at the landscape to remind us that our hands were not going up quickly enough."

"Did you say the *Black Skimmer*?" asked the young chief.

"Yes," answered Dr. Davis. "Did I not make that clear? We are part of a scientific party on that vessel, and this is one of our side trips. We wish some scientific data on Florida."

"You told us that, but you did not mention the name of the ship." The man consulted a moment with his companion, who then started off among the trees. The woman disappeared with the chief. Pete took his former position, with his eye on the

captive group. Mr. Collier sat down by Van to hear how the boys came to be caught, when the almost reeling "Joe" came up and addressed Dr. Davis. He carried a bottle, which he offered.

"Have some? Fine foreign wine, jus' imported, brung in on the *Bl*——"

"Joe! That's enough!" said Pete, stopping him.

The expression on the face of Dr. Davis was comical, a mixture of surprise and pity. "No, thank you," he replied to the friendly Joe. "I should say that it might be better for you to leave it alone, my friend. No," he added, as Joe still held out the bottle in drunken stupidity, "none of us drink. We need all our senses."

The young leader appeared again. He was nervous and watchful.

Van half closed his eyes and stretched out once more, a little behind the rest. Then, hearing a little rustle in the thicket at his left, he glanced in that direction through his lowered lids. A hand cautiously parted the leaves. Van caught a glint of gold, and had a moment's look at ugly features which he knew. There was a sound of some one's moving away through the jungle. Van made no move. But it had been Earrings, who had looked through the

bushes to identify the group. They would be released, he felt sure.

It was sometime, however, before the leader came to speak to them again. "We have decided not to detain you," he said. "You may go back to the dock and wait for your launch. To report us at any villages would not be worth your while, for we shall be far away before any one could take us. Go back to the dock and stay there. If you attend to your own affairs, nothing disagreeable will happen."

The man's expression was still grim and forbidding. It angered Van and Albert, but the older men were calm, having learned self-control by a longer experience. Dr. Davis asked for their firearms and they were returned. "We have plenty ourselves," grimly said the young man.

Van was keeping a few thoughts to himself as they walked back over the jungle road, going around curves, avoiding great trees, climbing over roots and treading upon the lower growth. He had a plan which he hesitated to propose, for fear of its being forbidden, but he was anxious to try it.

The boys made a good fire. Van's hot coffee tasted "like food from Olympus," Dr. Davis told him. "This," said the scientist, "will warm us without taking away our senses or inciting us to evil, though

even coffee acts too strongly upon some people. I am a peaceful man," he continued, "except when they stir things up too much in the faculty; but I felt somewhat disgraced to have been caught and dictated to by men like that."

"You are just right, Uncle Doc!" exclaimed Albert, indignantly.

"The case was hopeless," said Mr. Collier. "We were taken unaware, far too distant from any authorities, who might be notified. All we can do is to stop at the nearest town and tell them to watch this jungle."

Van, listening, tossed a piece of orange peeling in among the bushes near him. It was already growing dark and the jungle looked dim and mysterious. "There is one more thing, Mr. Collier," said he, "that I would like to do, if you and Dr. Davis will permit it. Al and I have not said anything about it, but we are quite sure that the 'imported' liquor Joe was offering came from the *Black Skimmer.*"

Dr. Davis looked up, from the old stump on which he sat, and expressed his surprise in the question, "Why, how can that be?"

"Boats have been leaving, Dr. Davis, at night, and while I have not actually seen one loaded with

the stuff, I have recognized the *Black Skimmer* boat at this beach. In fact, I marked it. It is there now, and if you don't mind, I think that Al and I could hide away and see what men go there after dark to take it off. Of course, we may miss them. After you and the chief bootlegger talked about the *Black Skimmer,* I saw a sailor that Al and I call Earrings looking through the bushes at us, to identify us, we think. They have brought liquor over here and I suppose that they have been helping load, or take it to other points near here. There are lots of little islands and jungles."

"Look!" said Albert. "Isn't that a boat going up the river now? Yes, it's empty. Somebody's going for the stuff! They've got some concealed landing up there."

Dr. Davis looked at Mr. Collier. "Can this be so? Do you suppose that Abernethy has anything to do with it?"

"I hope not."

"The captain has, I'm pretty sure," said Van, "for I heard him giving orders, when I had fallen asleep on a bench on deck and woke when the boat was leaving."

"What do you want to do?" asked Mr. Collier, looking at Van. "Perhaps it was fortunate, after all,

that we had so late a start today. If the *Black Skimmer* is that sort of a boat, we can scarcely stay with it long. It is a very queer ship, to say the least, with a decidedly bad crew."

"There is one thing, Mr. Collier," said Van, who did not like the idea of giving up any prospective cruise. "Perhaps this ship was loaded up with this at the foreign port, and when rid of it will not handle any more. But all I want to do is to find out if more of the crew are into this."

"Very well," said Dr. Davis, "if you boys will be careful to keep away from the rendezvous where they have the liquor, and if you will take pains to keep hidden from the crew, it may be well for us to know the facts. I am willing for Albert to go. Do not wait long, however. Hill may be back at any time and I should prefer not to spend the night here."

"Good work, Uncle Doc!" earnestly declared Albert. "We will be careful,—don't worry! We're none too anxious to mix up with either lot of them, perhaps particularly our own crew of pirates!"

"Honestly, Al," said Van, after the boys had plunged into the jungle. "I didn't expect that we'd be allowed to go. But I thought that it was time to tell them something."

CHAPTER XVII.

SPYING.

Slipping through the more scattered trees and growth of this section, Albert and Van made sure that there was no guard to halt them. They scarcely expected that there would be, for there would be great activity on the part of the bootleggers to dispose of their wares and get away. All the men would be needed, and they were probably convinced that the Davis-Collier party was harmless.

Nevertheless, the boys were careful. They kept behind the larger trees as they quietly made their way to the beach road. It was scarcely safe to push directly through the jungle. They would go by the road, yet be ready to slip into cover at the slightest warning of any one's presence. They were filled with the spirit of adventure in this strange jungle and were still angry at any thought of their "ignominious" capture.

Presently they reached the short cut through

which they had traveled into trouble. "Shall we edge through a little?" asked Albert.

Van answered the question by penetrating the more open jungle at the side and pointing to an open space beyond. "I see a light through there," he whispered.

Slowly they advanced, still keeping trees between them and such path as there was. Van was quite startled once when he put his hand on the limb of a small tree and touched a snake. "Ugh! Look out, Al. I put my hand on a snake!"

"One of those tree snakes, probably harmless," Albert replied. "Be careful, Van. We're getting too near."

Van was putting on his heavy gloves again. They had been told to wear them, but except in a place like this they had so far had little use for them.

It was quite dark in the jungle now. There was not much chance that they would be seen if they kept out of the lights used by the men and made no noise that the men might think suspicious. Occasional flashes came from the road which was only at a little distance now. They were using flashlights occasionally.

Now the glaring light from an automobile was turned upon a truck which was being loaded. They

drew back a little, and a stick snapped under Van's foot. Both stood perfectly still, for they could now see the leader standing near the end of the truck. He had turned at the noise, his head on one side to listen. But two men approched with a case of liquor and he seemed satisfied that they had caused the noise. "We got too close, Van," whispered Albert.

"Keep behind something," returned Van. "As the light moves, if it does, move with it."

But the automobile did not turn, and in a moment the boys were rewarded for the risk they took by seeing Earrings and another sailor with a long scar on his face, whom the boys recognized as one from the *Black Skimmer*. They were taking an active part in the loading.

The truck moved up the road and the car followed it. "Now's our chance to go while there's more or less noise," said Van.

Hastily the boys extricated themselves from the jungle and hurried to the beach road as rapidly as possible, keeping in the shadow as they ran toward the beach, for the moon was now up. Of that they were glad, for they could more easily identify the men from the *Black Skimmer* at long range. Some of them might be at the boat, too. They had no idea how many men had brought it from the ship.

No one seemed to be around. They boldly investigated the boat after due reconnoitering. The beach was open, of course. There was no growth to amount to anything along the sand dunes. Albert saw the mark which Van had made upon the ship's boat. So much was certain, that it came from the *Black Skimmer.*

"We'd better hunt up a good bit of jungle, Al," suggested Van. "Remember, we promised to keep in hiding."

Back they went to where the growth was higher. Van used his little pocket flashlight on the ground in the little recess which they found behind bushes and scrub palmetto. They poked around with a stick for possible snakes before entering. It was a good place, near a turn in the road where the moonlight would fall on the faces of those coming around it.

Had they not been so interested in the result, the boys might have been more uncomfortable than they were. The growth was not high enough to preclude the necessity of crouching. "Look out for cactus," said Albert, who had found some. "Say, here's the original mosquito camping ground!"

"Did you get a bite?" asked Van.

"*Did* I?" But it was Albert's turn to laugh, for

Van was now whipping his handkerchief about his face. Then their low conversation stopped. Above the sound of the surf that pounded the beach they heard voices. Two men were coming along. "I tell you Bill, the kid's got it," said one. It was Earrings!

Eagerly the boys listened. "Why didn't you have them search him, then? That was your chance."

"He wouldn't have it on him, not after he'd been searched once. Crook sez to me before he left the ship——." As the men passed by, no more could be heard, but Albert pinched Van's ear.

It was some time, as the waiting boys thought, before two more men came along. One was the man with the scar and the other a hard looking sailor whose name the boys did not know or recall. There was some rough conversation and the boys expected to hear the boat being put out. Nothing happened. Perhaps they were drinking, Albert suggested.

It was decidedly uncomfortable for the two waiting boys. They began to be a little uneasy at the length of their stay. Suppose Mr. Collier came hunting them. But he would surely be wise enough to keep out of sight.

After perhaps fifteen minutes, though there was no chance to use a flashlight to see the passage of time, one of the men came back along the road. "I'll

look where the road turns," he said, "and see if Jack's coming. Git the oars out. It's time to go." The boys recognized the voice. It was Earrings again.

Van had a moment of real anxiety when he realized that the oars were hidden in the jungle and not far from them. A man somewhat the worse for liquor almost stumbled upon their retreat, but was recalled by one of his comrades who had found the oars. But what was Earrings doing?

As the men went toward the boat with the oars, Earrings was watching them with an evil grin instead of making his way toward the turn in the road. Now they could hear that the boat was being pulled from where it had been drawn up and fastened at the dune. They were launching it. Earrings was taking advantage of their being occupied to do something on his own account. What could it be? Both boys watched him. He had stepped into the jungle at the other side of the road and was stooping. "He's digging for something," whispered Albert. That was quite evident, the digging process, though, did not occupy Earrings long. Presently he rose, patted the sand down with his foot and stooped to do something else.

"What's he doing now?" asked Albert.

"Seems to be tying up the bushes someway. Look, he's got a scrub palmetto leaf."

But Earrings tossed away the leaf which he had cut and now went to the turn of the road. There some one was coming. "At last," sighed Albert, stretching his tired feet.

"Hush, Al. Wait till they're gone."

Two men walked to the beach with no idea that they were being identified or watched by two boys who would know them again. Van kept his eye upon the place where Earrings had been digging. "Perhaps Earrings was burying something, Al," he suggested.

The boys waited a long time after the boat, they knew, was out upon the water. It would not do to be seen in the moonlight. Finally, they stood, concealed by the bushes, and saw that the boat was far out upon the water, on its way to the *Black Skimmer*.

At once Van ran across to the place where Earrings had been. "Look, Al. He's marked the place by cutting that palmetto leaf in a queer way and if he hasn't tied two branches of that bush together!" On the ground, too, there were several branches of twigs, interwoven, and fastened down by the end of one of them, pushed into the sand. Quickly Van's

gloved hands went down into the sand, pulling up a small bag made of a bit of leather.

"Crusty's diamonds?" queried Albert.

"I think so; but maybe they are Earrings', after all. Tell me what to do about it."

As Van spoke, he tipped the contents of the bag into his handkerchief. Ah, the beautiful gems, glittering in only a bit of moonlight! Albert almost held his breath at the size and beauty of Crusty's jewels. For a moment, neither said anything. Then Albert answered Van's question.

"If I were you, Van, I'd take them. There can't be duplicates and if these are just like what Crusty had, you are safe in taking it for granted. Earrings talked to you about them himself. They are what he was after. Don't you suppose he opened the safe and got them. He probably left the box behind on purpose. If they were discovered, these would be different ones, you see, not Crusty's at all."

"Oh, these are Crusty's all right," said Van. "Yes; I'll put them in the bank at Miami, and perhaps we'll find out to whom they do belong some time. For the present I'll consider them Crusty's. He gave them to me to keep. Won't Earrings be surprised? He'll think that one of the other gang watched him and took them. It will be a good thing for Crusty,

if he ever turns up. He'll not be suspected of having them any more; and perhaps it will let me out, too."

Nothing except the three stones were in the bag. Van tied them in a corner of his handkerchief, stuffed that into his pocket and was ready to start, tossing the bag on the sandy ground. But Albert picked it up, filled it with sand and buried it again, replacing the interwoven sticks above. "Imagine Earrings when he plans to be alone to dig this up!"

Van looked troubled. It was a miserable business, but Albert reminded him of Earrings' character. Don't be soft-hearted about such a villain, Van. Earrings would do plenty to you to get these, and it is pretty sure that he was in the attack on Crusty. Probably the pirate named Crook told him that he had not had an opportunity to open the safe, and left him his tools."

"No; somebody got the combination, you know. But you are right about Earrings, I am sure."

No time was lost on the run to the camp fire. As before, the boys kept to the shadows; but it was more than likely that the gang of smugglers had gone by this time. "Did you hear that fellow talk about shooting up the bushes if any thief had taken

the oars?" asked Albert. "I was afraid that they would do it just for a drunken pleasure."

"It didn't sound any too well to me," Van acknowledged, "but we could have made our appearance."

"We would have been disposed of anyway," said Albert. "The Daytona paper would have reported two boys lost in the jungle, and they never would have found us."

The boys who were beginning to realize the risks they had taken, gladly saw their own campfire; and there was Dr. Hill, coming into its light with a happy expression on his face.

"Come on," said Dr. Hill, rubbing his hands. "I did not have to go back to the ship after all, which was fortunate on account of low tide. I found my traps in the launch, but we waited near the Inlet to watch some very interesting birds, and as we were so near Coronado, we took supper there. I found some very interesting specimens in another place on the river. You ought to have been with me, Collier, for those birds. I've brought you a valuable shell, Davis. Its inhabitant is alive."

Wasn't that just like the doctor! Van laughed to himself in the shadows. But Dr. Hill did have the grace to apologize very nicely for keeping them

all waiting. Dr. Davis and Mr. Collier did not try to restrain their mirth, though Dr. Davis immediately took his friend to task for the whole performance. The fact was, of course, that Dr. Hill had simply forgotten time and everything else.

"The only thing that lets you out, Hill," said Dr. Davis, "is that the boys here were really in trouble; and if you had been here with the launch, you would only have added to the general mix-up. The thing for us to do next is to drop down the river further and get away from the vicinity of these smugglers. We have quite a tale to relate, Hill, having been held up in the jungle."

CHAPTER XVIII.

SHORES AND DISCOVERIES.

THE charms of the Indian River are almost too well known to need description; but there is a difference between those tourists who go to Florida merely for the winter climate and the social pleasures of gay hotels and bathing beaches, and those who have a particular interest in the strange and beautiful natural surroundings. The greatest thrill comes in the first season; but the lure remains.

Van Arvin was impressed with the difference between everything here and what he had known. For the first time in his life he picked up oranges from beneath the laden trees in the groves. He saw how the pineapples grow, planted in rows in the fields. It almost seemed that the two professors planned many side trips for the benefit of their assistants, yet they were enjoying it themselves.

Van in his gratitude went out of his way to find means of serving Dr. Hill, and he had the satisfaction of seeing that the professor was coming to de-

pend upon him in many respects. While both gentlemen were energetic and by no means old, their recent life in school-room and laboratory had been more or less confining. Some things were hard for them that were easy to the boys.

Van and Albert collected many of the specimens now and they were learning how to preserve them, as well. Van realized, though he had never attended college, that he was getting first hand knowledge of what was given to university students in the lecture rooms, laboratories and the museums. Here he was on the field, seeing where they were produced. In one of his pleasant talks with Mr. Collier, that keen young scientist told him that he was receiving a combined course in botany and zoology in the best class room that he could have and under two of the finest teachers in the world. "Make it three," Van had said, with a gesture and bow that included Mr. Collier in the list or his instructors. Van did it in a humorous way, but he meant it, as Mr. Collier well knew.

One little side issue that interested Van was the apparent contest, joking as it was, between Dr. Davis and Dr. Hill in regard to which would have the services of Dr. Collier during the next school year. But he knew that Mr. Collier's contract was

already with the university represented by Dr. Hill; and in his natural interest in Dr. Hill, with the hope that he would find it possible to go to college there, Van wanted Mr. Collier to stay where he was and told him so.

There were other launches and yachts going down the inland waterway. People as well as birds were migrating to the south. In his new enthusiasm, Van wondered why any one who could follow the birds would stay in the north.

As they went further south, the abundance of palms pleased Van. The boys took snap-shots of gardens, beaches and people at Palm Beach, but Dr. Hill was like a fish out of water there. This was not his sort of life, though the season had scarcely begun.

The procession of towns on the east coast of Florida pleased Van. He made up his mind to come back some day. At Miami the *Dauntless* took them all about the waterways of Biscayne Bay and the ocean, but they saw nothing of the *Black Skimmer.*

The *Dauntless* once placed among the shipping, the boys were permitted to follow their own devices in spending the day. They were to return to the launch to spend the night and save a hotel bill. As

Albert put it, they were to be "rocked in the cradle of Biscayne Bay."

"Do not stay too late, boys," advised Dr. Davis. "We want to find Abernethy at his hotel, if possible, and talk over future plans, as well as the subject of the *Black Skimmer* and its recent cargo. We can not be associated with anything like that, and it is my opinion that Abernethy does not know. He seems like too fine a man for that. How about it, Arvin?"

"I *want* to belive that, Dr. Davis. I could tell better after I saw how he takes our information."

"You are a cautious lad," laughed Dr. Davis. "We ought to have you with us, but Hill and I are accustomed to detective work; aren't we, Hill?"

"In a limited field, Davis, such as who put the alarm clock in the chapel organ."

The boys started off, laughing and wishing that they had been there to hear the alarm go off at the critical moment. Van wanted to find a bank first of all, to get rid of Crusty's property. He thought that he would keep his money, wearing it in his belt.

The southern official whom Van consulted at the bank was very courteous. Van had made up a little package, marking it "Held in trust for sailor known as Crusty." This he had put with a few things of his own in a larger package, with his name, his home

address and that of his guardian as well as Mr. Walter's. He explained everything to the officer of the bank and left well satisfied and considerably relieved. Crusty's trust was now in safe hands.

Trinkets characteristically Floridian were bought to be sent home, for Van thought of Cousin Emily, Grace and the "kiddies." The boys mailed their letters and sent bright post cards to their school friends. Van wrote, "Escaped from Pirates on the *Black Skimmer*. Safe in Miami," and thought that the boys would be interseted. Mark would be interrogated about what that meant, but Mark had been instructed not to tell.

The letter to Mr. Walters, Van had written very carefully, for it would be just like Mr. Walters to read it to the school. He told only the most attractive things of the trip down. "They grow ferns in the basket-work on the outside of the date palms," he wrote, "and you can raise anything on the bark of the live-oaks, from ferns and orchids to snakes," he added, though he knew that they would laugh at that exaggeration.

The day was scarcely long enough for what they wanted to do. They rode on street cars and 'buses and made a trip to Miami Beach, where they took a swim and regaled themselves upon pop, peanuts,

popcorn and ice cream. It was so hot that the various stands which sold orangeade were well patronized by the boys, and the close of the day found them eating oranges in the principal park. After all this they wanted only a light meal in a cafeteria, whence they sought a moving picture to while away part of the evening. Rather less spiritedly than in the morning hours, two tired but satisfied lads at last sought the *Dauntless*.

Curious as they were to find out what Mr. Abernethy and the professors had decided, they were too sleepy to wait. Dr. Davis and Dr. Hill had not returned, but Mr. Collier was there writing up his notes. He had not cared to visit the hotel, and had gone, like the boys, to see what he could see. "I met one of the *Black Skimmer* sailors on the street, Arvin," said Mr. Collier. "I was surprised to see him, for our engineer has inquired and found that the *Black Skimmer* sailed for Cuba, or some other of the islands, leaving all of its passengers here. I inquired, accordingly, and was told that he "wouldn't stay on that ship for a thousand dollars, no, not for a million!" I asked him if it was not safe, and he said that she would not sink, but that the crew and the captain and the cargo were the matter."

"The captain?" asked Van.

"So he said; but he may have personal reasons in regard to the captain, you know. He asked me where you were, Arvin, and said that he had a message for you. 'Ask him if he remembers Crusty,' he said."

"Wow!" said Van with a comical grin. Do you suppose that's Earrings, Al, wanting to know 'wot I done with them dimuns?"

"I sincerely hope not," said Albert. "What did the man look like, Mr. Collier? Did he wear earrings?"

"I don't remember," said Mr. Collier. "He had some kind of a bandage on his head."

"That's Earrings," groaned Albert. "Van you'd better make yourself scarce."

"I told him to come to the *Dauntless* in the morning," continued Mr. Collier, "and that I would tell you not to hurry off anywhere."

"What did he say to that?" asked Albert. Van was quiet.

"He asked where the *Dauntless* was tied up, and that was all."

"Sleep on your revolver tonight, that's all, Van," Albert cheerfully suggested.

"I will all right," Van replied, "but I'm going to sleep, Earrings or no Earrings. We have not told

you all the details, Mr. Collier, of our dealings with that pirate. It has to do with my being held up for some jewels that a sailor fairly forced on me to keep for him. It will be better for you, in case Earrings is around, not to know of the last performance, and better for me, too, if you are asked any questions. But it has been quite an adventure and I'd like to tell you some time."

"I'd like to hear it, Arvin; but perhaps this isn't the man. He didn't strike me as such a terrible pirate. Now that you speak of it, I do recall a sailor with earrings on board, but I did not like the looks of the crew and kept away from them. We'll lock ourselves in tonight, and if you like, we'll anchor at a distance from the other shipping. Have you the jewels now, Arvin?"

"No, sir; I——"

"Better not tell us what you did with them, Arvin. So far as I know they are in the hands of their owner. Goodnight."

Dimly Van was conscious of hearing the voices of Dr. Hill and Dr. Davis, and of feeling the *Dauntless* in motion. Good. They were going somewhere else, by Mr. Collier's advice. Then he knew nothing more till morning.

They cooked a light breakfast on board that next

morning. While they ate it, Dr. Davis told Van and Albert about their talk with Mr. Abernethy and handed them their mail, forgotten in their pockets, till the conversation happened to make the scientists think of it.

"Abernethy was not as much astonished as we might have thought an innocent party would be," frankly said Dr. Davis. "He said that he was displeased about many things on board the *Black Skimmer* and had remonstrated with Captain Pitt about the character of the crew. This, he said, would explain some things that had puzzled him. He asked if you definitely saw the members of the crew helping the smugglers. I told him that you both had seen them.

" 'That will have to be taken up with the captain when the *Black Skimmer* returns,' said he. It seems that the captain had arranged to take this short trip to Cuba before the ship was chartered by Mr. Abernethy; and Mr. Abernethy had consented to have the captain and crew go there, while he took a motor trip with his wife and the girls and we scientists finished what we want to do in southern Florida. He suggested that we send home such specimens as we have ready from here, before we go further in the *Black Skimmer,* if we do. I can see that Aber-

nethy is considerably annoyed over this matter. So far as we are concerned, our trip into the swamps will satisfy us, and we need not be dependent upon the *Black Skimmer* for a short voyage to some of the islands and trips on the Gulf Coast."

That sounded interesting to Van. What ho, the swamps!

"We met Mrs. Abernethy,—quite a handsome woman," Dr. Hill offered. "Betty Caruthers sent her goodbyes to you boys. They are leaving for the West Coast early this moring. We did not see Miss Juliet, and I think that her chevalier has departed."

To think that Dr. Hill had noticed Dicky's devotion. But then any one would. Albert gave Van a glance of amusement. Poor Dicky, faced by maternal decrees!

By daylight the visit of Earrings did not seem so terrifying. The engineer was a strong young man, and the combined forces, armed, were not to be despised. Van looked to his gun and Albert saw that his was loaded. Neither expected to shoot any one, but it was well to have some protection when pirates were abroad.

They were scarcely through breakfast and cleaning up, bunks and dishes, when the engineer called loudly from the deck that Arvin was wanted. Albert

followed Van up to the deck; and how he grinned when he saw who was there. It was a sober young fellow whom the boys had considered the best of the crew. His head was tied up with a bandage, but it was one for a purpose and not the handkerchief turban that Earrings affected.

"Hello, there," said Van cordially, "how are you? Mr. Collier said that some one had a message for me."

"Yes, sir," said the man, his face brightening at Van's manner. "I suppose you don't remember me in the *Black Skimmer* crew."

"Oh, yes, I do. Come up here, Al, and we'll all sit down together."

On the seat along the side of the deck the three sat down, while Van asked the sailor if he had been hurt.

"Yes, sir. One of the crew knocked my head against something the night before we got into Miami. Then I left the ship and I never will go back. But it was Crusty that wanted me to tell you how he got away from the ship all right. It was Crusty that played his own ghost, you know. They threw him over, but he managed to crawl up and over into the ship again and I found him, luckily. I kept him till he was about well, and I managed to

get him into the *Dauntless* and took him ashore. He told me where to look for him in Miami."

"How did you manage to hide him out?" asked Albert.

"I found a place in the hold and we fooled them all. Crusty wasn't such a bad sort when you come to know him, though he was grumpy. Those things that he gave you he said belonged to him all right."

"Well, where will I find him?" inquired Van. "I put them in a bank to be kept safely."

"You won't find Crusty at all, sir. Curious, ain't it, that Crusty should get wounded that way and get over it and then go sudden? That's what happened. He went to the hospital down here, so they told me at the place where he said he was going. I think that he was going to have some man on the *Black Skimmer* arrested, probably Earrings, though the others had left. That was why he came to Miami. But he got sick in some other way. I'm not sure that they knew just what was the matter. Anyhow I found him there. He told me to tell you all about it, and to keep the stuff for him if he ever got away from the hospital. If he didn't, you could have it and welcome."

"Didn't he want you to have something?"

"Yes, he said so; but I thought he was beginning

to wander. The next time I went, he was gone The priest attended to everything, and Crusty had enough money on him to pay for a good funeral. They took care of his money at the hospital."

Van looked troubled. "Poor Crusty!" he said. "He told me that he hadn't any people." For a moment no one spoke. "What are you going to do now?" Van asked. "Will you give up the sea?"

"My girl wants me to, but I may have to go. She wants me to buy a little place down here and raise stuff for the northern market. That's why I stayed with the ship till we reached Miami. She lives here."

"Boy!" exclaimed Van. "Crusty's jewels will do the work! Come on, I'll go to the bank, get them out and we'll divide. You did more than I did for Crusty."

"The man shook his head. "Crusty only said that you might give me something, but he had a notion about you."

"That's all right, but I have a notion about you," said Van. "Al, come on; we'll all go, if you don't mind."

Albert thought it as exciting as anything which had happened yet. Picking up his cap, he led the way from the *Dauntless*, which by this time was docked at a pier. At the bank they were permitted

to go into a room by themselves, while Van showed the sailor Crusty's jewels and enjoyed the astonishment and pleasure of the man at the sight.

Albert wondered just what Van would do; but the sailor had something to say, for he was an honest man. After some debate, he said that he would take one of the large diamonds only. "You can't divide three, sir," he said, "and you are after an education. You might give that ruby to your girl some day."

Van laughed. "I may never have any; but here are the smaller stones, too. Your sweetheart may like one in a ring. These have been set, Mr. Abernethy says."

After the matter was finally decided and the sailor was the proud owner of several stones, he reminded Van that if he tried to sell them he would have difficulty. "They will think that they are stolen."

Van considered the matter a few moments till Albert said. "Why Mr. Abernethy, of course! He'll vouch for the sale, when he comes back from their motor trip. He might help you buy your place, too."

It was decided, then, to leave the stones in the bank till Mr. Abernethy's return, though it was best to leave them separately, as Van might still be in the swamps when Mr. Abernethy came back. Ac-

cordingly, two packages, small, but valuable, were labeled with their owners names and addresses, and Van drew a sigh of relief when the whole matter was concluded. The sailor gave him an address where he might be found when Van returned from the Everglades. "But I'll be laying low," said Andrew Eken, whenever the *Black Skimmer* docks here."

Van had quite forgotten about his mail in the excitement. Home seemed very far away, but the letters recalled it. It was good to have been remembered. Mark's letter was clever and full of the school news. What would Mark say at the story of Crusty's jewels, and the latest development?

Mrs. Wayne wrote something was hindering Mr. Swift from moving in, but that fuel had been sent for the winter and that she was still keeping up the place under his direction. She had had a good opportunity to go over everything and to pack or make ready what Van should have taken out for him and stored. Mr. Swift had come to the house several times and had spent considerable time at the desk and in the library.

Mr. Walters wrote that he had called at Mr. Swift's office, telling him that he held a statement of Mr. Arvin's property and that he wanted to go

over it with him as soon as he could spare the time. "I tried to avoid offending him, but of course he sees that we do not trust him and that your friends are not willing to see him handle the matter without accounting to them. He asked me to place the statement in his hands and I told him that I thought it would be better to go over it together. He agreed, but could not give the matter his attention at once on account of the press of business and a trip that he was obliged to make. But I have my eye on him, Van, and if it is best I will employ a lawyer to handle it."

Van was not surprised that there was no letter from Mr. Swift, in fact he was relieved that there was none for him to answer. He would apologize to Mr. Swift if the facts showed that he was doing him an injustice. But the affair had ceased to be important to Van, except in vindication of his father's arrangements for him.

Another day was spent in sight-seeing and in helping Dr. Hill and Dr. Davis with certain arrangements for the coming expedition into the Everglades. By this time Van and Albert were close friends, having met these adventures together, and having by this time exchanged their views of mat-

ters in general and the brief histories of their lives and their families.

Late in the evening, they were sitting on the deck of the little *Dauntless,* talking about the shipping, the city, the trip ahead of them and the *Black Skimmer.*

"Someway, I can't help thinking of poor Crusty," said Van. "Think of my having those jewels when I didn't even *like* him and felt impatient about the whole thing! And here we are, Andrew and I, gloating over those pitiful stones!"

"Van!" exclaimed Albert, "*You,* 'gloating!' Almost any other boy would be caring more about it than you do."

"Oh, yes, I care. I'm glad to have them. It means college sure now."

"Then why *not* be glad about it? Can Crusty use them now? Tell me that."

"Scarcely."

"Wouldn't you hand them over to him if he were here."

"Certainly."

"Then brace up and be glad you've got 'em. Don't be plain *simple*!"

Van grinned down at Albert's saucy expression. "Simple, am I? Well, very likely you're right, Al."

Albert rose, yawned, and stretched his arms over his head. "I will say, though, Van, that for some reason or other everybody in this crowd thinks that you are 'rather fine.' Uncle Doc said so. To copy the style of the immortal Earrings, them wuz his words!"

By way of expressing his affection, presumably, Albert leaned over, gave Van a poke in the side and a smart slap upon the shoulder, and ran below to their little cabin.

But Van sat out under the stars for some time, listening to the lapping of waves and feeling upon his face the soft, warm wind of the Florida night. Notes had been despatched in reply to his letters. They were leaving Miami tomorrow, and Van wondered what adventures would meet them in the Everglades.

THE END.